5 Years 7 Months Earlier

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5 Years 7 Months Earlier

by TigerPrawn

Summary

After their fall from the bluff Hannibal is presumed dead and Will is severely injured. When Hannibal Lecter appears to have resurfaced in South America, Will - considered another Lecter victim - is put into Witness Protection by Agent Starling for his own safety.

It will be almost 6 years before Hannibal finds him. In that time both have been on a journey of discovery about themselves and what they are willing to do to get back to the other.

Notes

This story came from a prompt by Raintofall in the Cannibal Pub - based on a Hannigram dream she had where Hannibal finds Will in a relationship with another man sometime later. Many thanks to her for letting me run with the idea XD

PLEASE NOTE: Just to avoid confusion in how I have split the story by how much earlier it is... The story starts in the *present* which is 5 Years and 7 Months after TWOTL and then is filled in via flashbacks starting with the end of TWOTL to the present - so each "so many years and months earlier" refers to how much earlier it is from the present.

I guess this will be a kind of slow burn? Hannibal and Will won't be reunited until chapter 11.... but everything that happens in between is so important to both of them and any relationship they will be able to recover. Please don't squick at the Will/OC thing - this is a journey for him and believe me he spends the WHOLE time thinking about Hannibal and being a terrible boyfriend as a result lol. So please give it a go and don't let it put you off, because it will be worth it once the boys are back together!

Chapter 1

John Grey stretched and yawned, squelching his toes in the dew-damp grass beneath his bare feet before he retrieved the now soggy paper from the lawn. That damn kid could never get it on the porch.

He opened the fragile, wet pages gingerly as he started back to the house, not looking up until he heard a throat being cleared and was greeted with a mug of coffee being thrust at him. He smiled his thanks as he took the mug. The manipulation of his facial muscles caused a slight tightening over his cheek - a reminder of the scar there, mostly hidden in his beard.

"Thanks darlin'" A Southern drawl that seemed to have resurfaced after the first six months in California, drawn out by the desire to keep something of himself, something from before. Long before.

"Don't thank me! You're the one cooking breakfast, and we're out of eggs… so… drink up!" A bright tone, bright smile.

Craig was undeniably a morning person, and generally a happy guy. In that respect, he should balance John out. Be a counterbalance to the moody, grumpy person that John often was. He should stop John from spending too much time in his own head, which was no good for anyone.

John Grey was pretty sure he could be happy, settled, content, with Craig Harris.

Will Graham wasn't so sure.

5 Years 7 Months Earlier

"It's beautiful…"

He meant it. He had never meant anything so desperately in his life. Never wanted anything so desperately. The blood, the thrill of the kill, hunting like a pack with Hannibal.

Hannibal.

He had known for a long time, a very long time, that Hannibal was in love with him. He hadn't realised until he had asked Bedelia in his almost consuming desire to confirm what was already clear, that he was in love with Hannibal too.

Will Graham hadn't really had much experience with love. His childhood had given him a rocky start and his empathy disorder had put paid to anything remotely meaningful until he had met Hannibal Lecter. Not that he had realised it at the time.

No, he hadn't realised what *that* was - he had thought it was a close friendship, something he'd also had little experience of, until he met Molly. The way it was with her reminded him of his friendship with Hannibal. It was the way things went with Molly - the friendship they

built, the relationship on top of that, that he seemed to let build up around him that had made him finally realise. He had been - he was - in love with Hannibal Lecter.

His inability to know how to deal with that love, both his own and Hannibal's... The inability to understand himself better, accept himself sooner, and find a happiness that reflected Hannibal's - had lead them to the top of the bluff. Had lead him to make a split second decision in his head. No rationale, no premeditation. Nothing beyond: *Live together or die together.* And in that moment, fresh from the kill, overwhelmed by his lust for blood and Hannibal alike, living felt too overwhelming. Too complicated and bloody and full of more of the pain he had experienced all his life, but especially since meeting the man he had come to love.

5 Years 5 Months Earlier

"Will?"

The voice was familiar. Concerned.

"Will? Can you open your eyes?"

He did and was immediately blinded by sterile white light. His senses flooded with the sounds and smells around him - monitors beeping, antiseptic, decay. Death.

"I'll go get Doctor Montgomery." A light all-business voice left the room.

He managed to narrow his senses and finally focus his eyes on the figure at his bedside. A bearded, scruffy looking Jack Crawford stood next to him. Next to his hospital bed. He was in a hospital bed. A private room. Alone. Except Jack…

"Ha… Anniba?…" His voice broke painfully and he erupted into a coughing fit,doubling over painfully - his whole body heavy and aching. Jack tried to gentle him back onto the bed and then handed him a cup of water with a straw directed at his mouth.

"You'll do just fine Will...You're doing just fine. You're on the mend, and you're awake now. Don't worry about anything else right now. You're safe, Hannibal's gone. We just need to get you better. That's all that matters."

Hannibal. Gone.

What did that mean? His throat was raw, every part of his body burned from lack of use. His eyes felt heavy and began to slowly close again despite the effort he put into staying awake.

Will felt tears prick his eyes. Felt a tight pull in his chest. The only thing that truly mattered could be lost to him for all he knew.

5 Years 1 Month Earlier

Will had finally settled into a routine. It wasn't one he especially liked - with three sessions of physio a week, the psychiatrist once a week, and Jack's regular friendly visits - but it was a start. Rehabilitation had been going well. You could almost not tell at all that his right leg had

been pretty much smashed, unless of course you saw him stand or walk - or had the misfortune to see the scarred flesh that covered metal plates and pins. He spent a lot of time thinking how he would clearly have been better off if they had amputated. Instead he had to lug around this piece of half-dead meat that they assured him would improve if only he gave himself the chance and worked at it. That was usually right before they called his therapist to come in ahead of schedule.

“Mr Graham is having one of his black days.”

Well who fucking wouldn’t?

He’d wanted to die when he went over that bluff. He’d wanted to die for a second so brief it was devastating to realise the consequences of it. He’d wanted to kill them both and have them forever conjoined in death. But, really only in that terrible and everlasting moment. He wasn’t suicidal, or at least he hadn’t been, not really. It was a bizarre gut reaction in the heat of a very extreme moment.

Now was a different matter. He still wasn’t really suicidal, and although he was depressed, he was unable to reveal the real reason behind that to the staff and to Jack. He was fed up. And with Hannibal gone there were some days when he didn’t feel like he had an awful lot to live for, but there wasn’t a lot to die for either.

His doctors, Jack, the FBI - none of them knew the truth of what had happened that night. He had been found smashed on the rocks, Hannibal missing presumed dead. He had woken up nearly 2 months later, brought around from his medically induced coma, to find the story everyone had decided on in his absence. That he and Hannibal had clearly been attacked and had fended off, and killed, Dolarhyde. There had then been a further scuffle when Will had tried to apprehend Lecter - Jack insisted on this even though his looks told Will he secretly believed he tried to kill Lecter and do the world a favour. Either way, they’d both gone over, dropped like stones into the roiling Atlantic.

And now Will was stuck in this weird limbo life of recovery without really anything to go to. No Walter and Molly, she’d sent a letter- a much nicer letter than he deserved. He tried to feel the loss of them but couldn’t - which he felt terrible about on their behalf. They had the dogs. The dogs he would miss. He hoped he could arrange to at least get Winston back once he was released. He had a connection with that dog above the rest. He had found him the same time he had met Hannibal.

Margot and Alana had gone. Used their vast wealth to say fuck it all and leave it all behind, and who could blame them. Jack seemed to alternate his time between visiting Will and visiting his local bar. He’d been suspended over Lecter’s escape and the internal investigation was still dragging on. Will hated hearing about it, but didn’t have the heart to tell such a broken man to fuck off.

Mostly it was just Will and the staff at the centre, and they were a mixed bunch. The only one he really had time for was a young man named Wes who was so flamboyantly camp that he annoyed the living fuck out of everyone. Except Will - he liked that Wes knew this about himself and was of the *Fuck ‘em all* attitude. It was refreshing. He was also *very* openly gay and liked to flirt with Will in a way that indicated he thought Will was straight but up for a bit

of banter. Will wasn't really sure about a lot these days, but whether he was straight seemed not only at the bottom of his list of concerns, but also irrelevant. It wasn't something he had dwelt on in the past and he wasn't going to dwell on it now. He wasn't going to question, and there was no point in exploring, the fact that he had fallen in love with another man. Hannibal was gone so what did it matter?

A knock at the door drew Will from his exercises - his 'physio homework'

"Mr Graham? I'm Agent Starling. May I come in?" A comforting Southern drawl made him instantly like the petite but steely looking young woman at his door.

"Of course. Is this about Jack?" He had already been debriefed on his involvement in the plan to use Lecter to trap Dolarhyde, but with the no end to the investigation in sight, he wasn't surprised they would want more from him.

"Jack? Jack Crawford? Oh, no sir. I'm not dealing with his investigation - he used to be one of my instructors so it would be a conflict. I am here about Doctor Lecter."

"Oh. I see… well, I've told your colleagues everything I can remember, and my memory is only going to get worse with time so I don't know what help I might be…" He found his own long buried Southern twang sounding through a little.

"Ah, no Sir, you misunderstand me. My fault - I should have explained better." She stepped closer and he picked up on her nervous energy; she was very new, fresh from the Academy he expected. Maybe he'd even taught her in class though she didn't seem immediately familiar. "There's been a sighting."

"What do you mean? A sighting of Hannibal? Of Hannibal Lecter?" He quickly added the last to seem less familiar.

"Yessir. He was sighted in Argentina. We're pretty sure it's a positive ID - we have security footage and a team from the local authorities went in and printed the area. A partial was found that appears to be a match."

"I don't know… I don't know what I'm supposed to do with this information…" Will wasn't really directing that at Starling, the words just spilled out. He had no idea how to process this. What did he do now? Where did he go? What did this mean? How could he find Hannibal, or did he wait for Hannibal to find him? Hannibal would look for him… surely?

Starling obvious picked up on the confused and painful emotions that crossed Will's face.

"Please don't fret sir, don't upset yourself. I have a couple of agents with me outside the door who will be taking it in turns to watch over you here. We're making arrangements now to move you somewhere safe, somewhere more secure. WitPro will be here in the morning to start going over the process with you-"

"Witness Protection?" Will interupted, confused for a moment before realising their version of events had him as another Lecter victim, one lucky to still be alive. There was nothing he

could do to stop this from happening without telling them the truth and that was not an option.

His stomach dropped and his blood turned to ice in his veins. *How will Hannibal ever find me?*

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Will hasn't really moved on but doesn't see how he and Hannibal will ever be reunited, so he tries to start living again and exploring things that Hannibal woke within him.

4 Years 9 Months Earlier

“You’re doing great John.” Brad’s Californian sing-song voice was bright and encouraging which was strangely not reflected in his obviously false smile. John - Will - didn’t need to try and get in the man’s head to know what was going on. Brad liked him and was going to miss him now that there sessions were coming to an end.

He’d also grown fond of the physiotherapist. They had seen each other three times a week at first and Will had been almost dependent on him for company as much as anything else.

Moving to Pasadena, California had been a mixed bag. A fresh start wasn’t something new to him; he’d moved a lot as a kid, and if he had ever needed one it was now. The flip side of it was that he could also do with friends around. He hadn’t realised until he had moved, that he was also better off making new ones. Jack was a mess, but his only friend through it all. And that made things hard because emotionally and mentally it was hard for Will to heal when he couldn’t really confide in anyone about what had really happened. He had grown used to being able to confide in someone - and damn Hannibal for that.

But Jack had his own problems. Will was sure the suspension and possible - likely - dishonourable dismissal was taking a greater toll than even Jack was letting on. And he was letting on a lot. Will was pretty sure it was the only thing that had kept him from suggesting to the new acting BAU head that they use Will as bait to bring Hannibal in. When it came down to it, he and Jack were no good for each other right now - they both had their own full plates to deal with. Leaving Jack was healthier for them both.

In Pasadena he’d had to change himself; his way of life. No longer living in solitude in the middle of nowhere. The closest he got was a comfortable house on one of the least populated roads near the top of Arroyo Park, only one close neighbour down the next driveway - a young family - the oldest kid sometimes raked his lawn for a few bucks. The house had woodland to the back and side and the park wasn’t too far to walk if he fancied it, even shorter to drive there, if he wanted to walk Winston. At least he had Winston -

Starling had come through for him there. She was a nice kid. She’d realised that the news of Hannibal being alive had been hard on him - though assumed it to be for different reasons than it was. He had really panicked. Mostly at the thought of going into witness protection

where he might never see Hannibal again. But what could he say or do about that? Without giving away what had happened? Without putting himself in the line of fire?

When she asked, in her polite Southern way, whether there was anything she could do he had been surprised to find she was sincere and he had asked for the first thing that came to mind - Winston. It had taken a few weeks - Molly had been good about it, but there hadn't been anywhere he could take the dog whilst he was still in recovery, so Winston had been buffeted around for the umpteenth time in his life, until he was finally delivered to John Grey in Pasadena.

Even so, human companionship was something he had grown used to in recent years, so making friends with Brad had been good - healthy. At the least it was nice that he liked the man if they were going to have to spend so much time together. He was sure he'd actually unloaded more on him than on his actual psychiatrist - to whom he could say very little. But John's problems were different to Will's: John had moved to Pasadena after breaking up with his wife. John's marriage had ended because an ex had reappeared on the scene and thrown things into turmoil - for which John took his share of the responsibility. John's ex was no longer in the picture and a fresh start was required. Over time he'd dropped in more, elaborated where he could without mentioning his *ex* was a serial killing Cannibal who he couldn't decide whether or not it would be a good idea to see again - which was also irrelevant because he was in witness protection to prevent just that.

Referring to, and thinking of, Hannibal as his ex was not only easy but also strangely cathartic. It allowed him to process a lot of thoughts and feelings about the man. And about himself. And about why he started to become a little sad when his walking improved and he went from seeing Brad three times a week, to two, to one.

4 Years 6 Months Earlier

Will shifted, ass high, causing an unintentional increase in pressure. He keened and arched his back into the feeling. This was very different to their usual - the times he had penetrated Brad. It hadn't been like being with woman, but it was more familiar. It felt - usual. But this was so different so as for him to realise something he had to often push from his mind - Brad was not Hannibal. And shouldn't he be? Shouldn't this be with Hannibal? Hannibal had awoken many things within him and deserved the experience of those things. Deserved to be buried deep within Will, teaching him more about himself, yet again, just as he had with the Dragon on the bluff.

He closed his eyes and imagined away wonderful, caring, patient Brad and thought instead of complicated, dangerous and strangely familiar Hannibal. A groan worked its way out of his throat. He angled his hips in a way Brad had done so many times. Gentle lips pressed against the skin of his shoulders and he wished for teeth. He grunted, somewhere between release and frustration, as the angle increased the pleasure that zinged through him - but it wasn't enough. How many times had he imagined this before he asked Brad to try it? How many times had he been inside Brad like this and wondered how Hannibal might fuck him?

Hard and desperate the first time. It would be fast and rough and what they both needed.

Will's cock throbbed and he reached a hand back, taking a tight grip on the flesh of Brad's thigh.

"Harder…" He managed to breath out the word. "Fuck me harder." It came out as a growl.

Brad seemed to hesitate a moment before he obliged. Will squeezed his eyes shut even tighter and thought of Hannibal. Imagined the way Hannibal's fingers would dig into his flesh where Brad's gently caressed. Imagined teeth nipping at his skin where Brad's softly kissed.

He lost himself to the sensation as his ever more sensitive prostate was hit against and the tight burn of being fucked verged on exquisite pain. All the while he imagined Hannibal over him, pressed to his back. The sounds he would make. How he would smell. Another groan escaped him and he pushed back against Brad's thrusts.

"Yes… unnngg…. So… yes…" He wasn't even sure he was speaking aloud as he felt the itch of pleasure low in his belly, felt his balls tighten up. He grabbed his cock, imagining Hannibal's hand, and stroked once. With a cry he came hard and unexpectedly across the bedspread beneath him. Brad slowed as Will rode the wave of his orgasm, but when his senses were regained enough he gripped a thigh again.

"Fuck me, dammit!"

Over sensitive now, burning and closer to pain than pleasure, but Will wanted it. He could imagine Hannibal doing this- fucking through Will's pleasure and into his own. With time they would perfect cumming together, but the first time would be like this. He bore down as Brad thrust into him, buried his head in his arms on the pillow and then Brad came with a deep moan and Will sobbed. Involuntary, but necessary - it had been the result of choking back Hannibal's name.

4 Years 4 Months Earlier

"John, this isn't going to work out." They were sat having lunch at a nice bistro Brad had introduced him to and that Will quite liked. It was casual, breezy - very California, very much how Will wanted his new life to be.

He was working again now, was almost completely discharged from medical care, though he had changed physio - which was down to once a month now - when he and Brad started dating. Work was part time, but it gave him something to focus on and even take home with him on occasion - fixing motors in a boat shop, sometimes helping rebuild some competition vessels. It was good to be working with his hands again. It was good not to have to use his mind - easier to keep it closed off. Easier to deal with the empathy when he wasn't actively turning it on and aiming it at people. Easier to be happy and content with only himself inside his head.

Brad wore his heart on his sleeve. Will had never needed empathy to read Brad. Brad who was, one of the nicest, most caring people he had ever met. Brad who had taught him a lot about men, about being with men and about what he enjoyed and the pleasure he was capable of giving in return. But ultimately, Brad wasn't Hannibal.

Brad was clearly upset and Will waited for the inevitable. As he did so he mulled over the fact that he'd always been surprised Molly and he never ended in a similar conversation and that he'd miss this bistro as it would only be fair for Brad to keep it in the breakup. He had been coming here longer even if Will did enjoy the place.

The thought struck Will as both weirdly normal - such a normal thing to consider, like a normal person having a normal breakup; not getting his now ex wife and step child almost killed, not going over the side of a cliff. But also very much not normal - should someone really be thinking about who gets to keep the bistro in the breakup whilst the breakup is actually happening?

“You’re not even really listening to me.” Brad’s tone was resigned and tinged with disbelieving humour. “John… I love you. I know this is a weird time to say it, but I… I guess I needed you to know it. I love you but I can’t do this any more… you’re never going to be emotionally available. Maybe if we’d met at a different time. Maybe if you were over *him*, if ever that happens.”

Will could see the words he was holding back, read them in his face - *no one can compete, not even your wife and child could compete, what hope do I have.* And there was no way Will could deny it.

“I’m sorry… I wish… You’re amazing, I wish things could have been different. But yeah, this isn’t fair to you. I don’t know when, even if, I can give you everything you need. Any more than I’m already giving now…” He sighed and remembered the numerous times he’d almost said the same words to Molly. She had just been looking for a happiness she could settle for, someone who was good to her and Wally; Will would do no matter how much he could or couldn’t invest. Brad was looking for someone special, for that forever person. And Will, as much as it would have been nice and as lovely as Brad was, Will wasn’t that person.

He could see Brad’s heart breaking. He’d clearly meant every word but perhaps had just held a tiny hope that Will would profess his undying love and intention to do better. Cutting Brad loose to find his the happiness he deserved was the kindest, most loving thing Will could do in that moment.

4 Years 1 Month Earlier

“Kevin.” The young man introduced himself over the thud of music.

“John.” Will replied, leaning in close so that he could be heard.

Brad had brought him to clubs like this a few times. Not this one, he was avoiding all of Brad’s haunts still - it was only fair. Well, maybe not quite like this. He hadn’t realised until he walked in that this place seemed to have a pretty set customer base - young men, early twenties with some possibly younger, and the older men who sought their company. Brad had called them twinks and chicken hawks.

He stood looking into the hungry eyes of a bright young gidget hoping to learn a thing or two from an older man and realised, he was the chicken hawk in this scenario. He felt suddenly old - when had that happened? How his life might have been different if he’d come to places

like this when he was twenty. He was also not likely to have anything new to show Kevin other than how to get off the bed without throwing out his shitty leg.

But Will was lonely. He wanted someone, even if just for the night. Preferably just for the night. So as with Kevin and the handful of Kevins before him, Will would take this guy home, maybe wake with him in the morning and then they'd both happily part ways with no expectation of more and Will with no care as to how disappointing he might have been for the poor boy.

He would repeat this again he knew,there were always more Kevins. He would take home and fuck him and marvel at the stupidity of these young men going home with strangers.

3 Years 7 Months Earlier

"What a beauty!" Will recognised the soft voice behind him as Mrs Whittaker. She was the kind of 70 years old you could be with a lot of money. Tanning hadn't done much to age her and her grey hair was almost platinum blonde, styled to perfection. Mrs Whittaker was a keen sailor and had passed the passion onto her children, Craig and Susan.

She had been very friendly with Will from the moment they had met at the boat yard; she'd even joked about stealing him away to work on her own vessels exclusively. She had warmed to his *Southern charm* as she called it – that apparently her late husband had had in spades. When he first started working at the yard she had passed comment about him being a good match for her daughter, but Will had mentioned that his boyfriend, Brad, might not be too pleased.

They had come to know each other over the months and she would sometimes bring iced teas with her and insist Will sit and keep her company whilst she waited on bills or whatever she had come to sort out. It was a pretence of course; she just liked to be social and had decided that Will was someone with whom she wanted to socialise. It had only taken a month after she had extracted from Will that he and Brad had broken up that she suggested he go on a date with her son, Craig.

"He's a lovely boy, too lovely for his own good sometimes. Meets the most frightful men. You are just the sort of fellow he needs and you're both currently single…"

"Be that as it may Mrs Whittaker, the fact that we are both men who enjoy the company of other men doesn't automatically make us an ideal match." Will had chuckled.

"Oh John, you do me such a disservice. I want only the best for my son and I think you are a very special gentleman. Do you think I would suggest he date just anybody?"

"I suppose not." Will grinned, finding that he wanted to go on a date with Craig for no other reason than to make Mrs Whittaker happy. There was something familiar about her that it had taken him a while to put his finger on – she reminded him of Bev. In nothing more than humour but it was enough for him to warm to her instantly. Dry and teasing, it felt nice. It felt a little bit like home. Perhaps that was something Craig had inherited. Perhaps going on a date with him wouldn't be so bad.

“Ok, give him my number… we can manage it from there I’m sure.”

“John, you make a mother very happy.”

Will felt warm and comforted. It felt nice.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

In some ways Will has a comfortable life, in other's it's a mess. Either way it's only a matter of time before the full force of what Hannibal ignited within him engulfs him and Dark Will resumes his Becoming.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

3 Years 1 Month Earlier

Will couldn't deny the attraction to Craig. Was it more than he had felt for Brad or was it just that he was better hiding that this would never be as fulfilling for him? He tried not to think about it. What he did think about was how he noticed guys now. He hadn't before Hannibal, but then before Hannibal he hadn't especially noticed anyone. He had liked Molly of course, found her sexually attractive but it was her stability he'd been attracted to. He had always been too busy trying to avoid people, trying to not feel every goddamn thing. But working with the FBI had done him one huge favour - it had burnt him out, and the three years away from them and Hannibal had allowed him to temper it, control it in a way he had struggled with for much of his life. It made California easier. He had to admit that California made it easier too, as everyone was so damn emotional about everything. People seemed to hide very little - it wasn't just Brad, he discovered, that wore his heart on his sleeve.

His thoughts turned to Brad for possibly the last time. He could have been happy with Brad if he'd let himself and in the end he had damn near torn down the nicest person he'd ever known. He was glad to have let him go. He was glad that Brad had survived him.

Craig was made of hardier stuff, but truthfully he didn't deserve Will any more than Brad had. So Will tried very hard not to be himself. Being grumpy and moody was impossible to avoid; sometimes he had dark moments that no amount of Californian sun was going to counteract. But the least he could do was try and give himself over, or at best seem like he was. Just to see how far that got him, as selfish as it might be. If it just ended up hurting Craig he'd have to let him go and just settle for a quick fuck here and there, maybe an occasional night guest. No attachments. He didn't do well with them, and it was hard to put in the level of effort required on his part when the other person was never the one he wanted it to be. They would never be Hannibal. They could never in their wildest dreams or darkest moments even come close to filling the void that man had left in his life.

He told Craig very little about his past relationships – skipped over Molly altogether to make it easier - and just like that, she was gone. He'd already had all those 'so are you bi?' conversations with Brad and he just didn't find it necessary. Will was Will, or John as it so

happened. But either way, he wasn't a label. Hannibal had awoken something in him that he wanted to explore, and on doing so had found a connection to Hannibal therein. He wasn't even sure that he was truly attracted to other men at all, just that they were a stand in for the one person, regardless of gender, that he wanted. Needed. A substitute was better than nothing, most of the time. Wasn't the thing that drew him to Brad his eyes that were just enough like Hannibal's. Didn't Craig's high cheekbones make his heart beat quicker the first time they met?

Things with Craig had gotten off to a weird start that Will had put down to his lack of experience with relationships, and relationships with men especially. Perhaps some element of it too was how much Will had changed as a person. John Grey was not the Will Graham that had left Wolf Trap for the last time all those many months ago. He was still figuring out who he was, much less who he was with someone else.

It had felt weird perhaps because of the instant connection. He was so much like his mum, enough like Bev to feel familiar, to feel like home that things moved quickly – much faster than they had with Brad. Within a fortnight they were almost inseparable, and with more sexual experience under his belt since Brad, things had become intimate pretty quickly. It was a whirlwind romance, and everyone involved couldn't be happier. Or as happy Will could be with anyone other than Hannibal. A happy he was willing to settle for.
And then Craig had cheated.

Will wasn't sure quite how to deal with it. They had been together a month and Craig had tearfully admitted he had been drunk, out for a friend's birthday and it had just happened. He was sorry, it wouldn't happen again.

Will ended it. It wasn't something he could deal with, he realised. He had no idea how to cope with such a thing and it couldn't be worth the mess of it, could it? Apparently it could because a week later Will was taking Craig back. They hadn't spoken the whole week until Craig came to his work and begged him, told him how much he'd missed him. How he was still getting used to be in a relationship, a serious grown up relationship, and it wouldn't happen again. And Will relented because the truth was he had missed… Craig? Maybe. He had missed the feeling of comfort and home that Craig gave him and he selfishly wanted that back. If he couldn't have Hannibal, he could have this at least.
Now five months and three more *mistakes* later on Craig's part, they were moving in together. Mrs Whittaker, Audrey, had insisted on helping *her boys* and so they were moving into a little house they might not otherwise be able to afford. A yard for Winston, near the boat yard. It was perfect. Shame the same couldn't be said for Craig.

2 Years 5 Months Earlier

"Fucking hell John, why the hell don't you get it? I thought we were going to Sasha's party?" Craig wasn't dressed for the dinner. He was wearing pool shorts and a light t-shirt whilst Will stood buttoning his dress shirt. Craig knew the dates and knew very well Will would never have agreed to go to Sasha's party that weekend of all times. He could barely stand Sasha at the best of times so why would he have agreed for them to go the same night as the charity dinner? Sometimes Craig's willfully shitty behaviour had Will's blood boil. Rude.

“Just go to the fucking party if that’s what you think you should do.” Will kept his tone level despite the venom in his words. How fucking hard was it for Craig to just be there when his family needed him instead of fucking them over for his fair weather friends, a room full of booze, and Will had to admit it, even a casual fuck with someone other than him.

“Anyone would think you were in a relationship with my mother not me!” It came out of Craig’s mouth in that hissy whine he sometimes had, a childish quality that reminded Will of a spoilt brat. Which of course Craig was, but even so, Audrey deserved a better son. Sometimes it felt like she knew that.

Will exhaled slowly and spoke through grit teeth. “Your mother has gone to a lot of effort and would appreciate our support. This charity dinner is once a-fucking year; is that so hard to fit into your schedule? For her? For me?” Will had been helping Audrey with some of the organisation of her annual fundraiser she had started for a cancer unit at the local hospice that had helped nurse her late husband. Will could take Craig’s shit, put up with his lack of respect or consideration even if sometimes he wondered why the fuck he did, but his lack of respect for his family galled Will. And when he spoke up about it he received the full brunt of Craig’s tantrum in lieu of all the tantrums he never got to have when Will didn’t confront him about coming home late smelling like sex and other men.

“John if I go along I’m going to be fucking miserable and make everyone around me miserable. I’m doing everyone a favour by not being there…” He was already picking up his keys. “I’ll tell Sasha you said hi.”

Will sat on the bed and breathed for a moment - deep breaths. Thoughts running through his head, flashes of images that he knew he had to press down. That final image of the Great Red Dragon as he drew his last breath.

Winston loped quietly into the bedroom and placed his head in Will’s lap with a gentle nudge and soft whine.

1 Year 11 Months Earlier

Will sat in the boat currently dry docked in the yard. He’d spent the week fixing the motor and it was due to be picked up on Monday, but for now it made a nice relaxing escape. Winston lay at his feet and he was half way through the four pack of beers he’d brought with him. Bottle of whiskey in his bag might make an appearance after that – it depended on how fucked up he needed to get.

When he’d moved to Pasadena he had cut right back on his drinking. He hadn’t touched a drop in the recovery unit and he didn’t *need* it now, the way he had needed it when it was a method of escape from his work and the carnage in his mind.

There was a different carnage now. It was becoming harder and harder to keep down the thoughts that were his own, that he could no longer try and convince himself and others were only those of the killers he had been charged with catching. These were the thoughts, this was the Will, that Hannibal could see. Had always seen.
For not the first or second time he would drink through it. He would walk away from Craig

for the night. He walked away as flashes of Garret Jacob Hobbs, Randall Tier, of Francis Dolarhyde burned through his mind.

He'd return, drunk and calm. He'd spend his evening imagining the calm of the ocean. He would remember his house in Wolf Trap and how it looked like a boat on the open sea. He'd remember the sailing trip he and Craig took with Audrey and Susan that first summer they were together. He would remember the feeling of home and comfort that kept him with Craig even when the spoilt shit came home stinking of booze with someone else's cum drying on him and in him.

Will scrubbed a hand roughly over his face. Why did he let himself be treated like this? He asked that question so many times and never answered it. There was no real answer. Craig was a nice guy a lot of the time. They worked. They made each other laugh; not as much as they used to, but it was something. They were easy and natural with each other. And between Craig and his family there was that unshakeable feeling of belonging that Will had never really had before – had only ever been on the cusp of before it had been taken away from him.

Was it worth it? Maybe not. But what else was there to do? They had a house; he had Craig's family. They had a life together, a good life, or at least it could be if Craig stopped fucking up. And who knows, maybe one day he would.

Truthfully, when drunk enough to admit it, he just didn't think he deserved better. He deserved Hannibal. If he couldn't have him then someone like Craig - lying, cheating, spoilt shit - was better than nothing and certainly better than fucking up nice guys like Brad.

Will nodded off to those thoughts and had vivid dreams of blood and crashing waves that startled both him and Winston awake.

3am. He shook himself awake and packed the rest of the booze up. He'd go home, probably arrive the same time as Craig, who would try and make jokes, and be sweet and Will would end up fucking him in some sort of twisted attempt to reclaim the situation. Smelling someone else on him the whole time, and likely not even the same someone elses he had smelt before.

As Will locked up the yard and headed to his car he heard a noise and Winston's ears pricked up and then back uneasily.

"…No…" Light and muffled.

"Shut the fuck up Leanne."

Will felt instantly sober and taut as the sounds of a struggle drifted towards him. He opened the car door and got Winston inside before heading towards the sound, just around the corner near the duplexes.

"I told you before, you don't know what the fuck is good for you!"

The sound then of flesh striking flesh, a sharp cry and thud of a body falling. Will rounded the corner to see a woman huddled on the floor, hands covering her face protectively. A man stood over her, menacing – his face darkened by anger. They had evidently just got out of the car in the parking lot with one door still open and were dressed smartly from a night out.

“Everything ok here?” Will slipped so easily back into cop mode.

“What the fuck is it to do with you?” The man straightened and the woman turned her face up to him, abject fear the only emotion there.

“Do you want me to take you somewhere safe ma’am?” Will asked the woman who continued to stare with terror in her eyes. This was clearly not the first time this had happened, it was writ large in her face and in the way the man carried himself. A bully, who terrorised and called it love.

“Do yourself a favour, friend and mind your own business.” The man had stepped up to him now and was poking a finger sharply into Will’s chest. Rude.

Without even thinking Will grabbed the finger and snapped it back with a sickening crack. The man screamed and fell to his knees. Will could have stopped there; on some level he knew it. But frustration pooled within him, bile forced up by anger.

No gun – a flash of Hobbs. No knife – a flash of Dolarhyde. Hands then. Hands like Tier.

Will was on the man, his fists raining down hard. Connecting with the wet sounds of skin ripping and blood spilling. He beat the man until all he could feel was wet flesh beneath his fists. All he could hear was a woman’s scream.

He wasn’t entirely sure how he got from there back to the shower block in the yard. Fire coursing through his veins was met with a cold jet of water. Blood washed from his hands and face down the drain. He threw his jacket in the wood burner after he dressed and started out.

He would go home to Craig and try to ignore what he had allowed.

The becoming he had delayed and, even without Hannibal there to encourage that need within him, so very deeply desired.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 4 COMING SOON -

Teaser:

5 Years 7 Months Earlier

The agony was almost too much to bear.

The physical pain was nothing to the loss of Will.

Hannibal had seen his body smashed on the rocks. As hard as he had tried to clutch to him, Will had fallen from his arms as they dropped - Hannibal into the ocean, Will onto the outcropping. The pull of the tide was too strong that, as the water swelled around him and threatened to fill his lungs, he was unable to fight the waves and swim to Will.

With every glance he was further from the rocks, further from Will. With every glance the sea threatened to pull him under. Before long he was turned around and there was only darkness as he tried to keep his head above water.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Hannibal survives but his life is forever changed by Will.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Victorine for beta'ing this chapter.

The house is nice, quaint in a way that apparently appeals to Californians. Picket fence and all. It is very much not where Hannibal imagined Will Graham might live, so different from the isolated wilderness of Wolf Trap.

He has to remind himself, this is not Will Graham. This is a new man, new history, new experiences. This is evidently a man with less weight on his shoulders and likely less of an imagination, in as much as he clearly has to suffer less from his empathy to be able to live in a place like this. He wonders if the FBI did finally break Will.

Or had he broken Will?

Will Graham - the person he had been, his history and experiences - had changed him. Just as Hannibal had changed Will, and now he no longer exists. Now, he is John Grey. And Hannibal isn't sure he knew the man any more than John would know who Hannibal had become in the intervening years. The man he had become when Will had changed him.

And yet, he is compelled to sit and watch. As the sun comes up and passers by begin to wander through the neighbourhood - jogging, walking dogs, going to work. All so normal. Painfully normal in a way his life has never been.

Was this what Will wanted? What he had needed all along?

His loitering caught the attention of two or three people making their return journeys past his car. He unfolded the map on the passenger seat, pretending to study it.

Hannibal only looked up again when he heard the voice.

"Thanks Darlin.'" Even with the slight but natural Louisiana drawl, Hannibal recognised Will's voice and it pulled everything within him taut and strained to breaking.

He watched the exchange between Will - John Grey - and his boyfriend, a Mr Craig Whittaker. They were dressed in pajama bottoms and t-shirts. Will's beard is a little more full than before the night on the bluff - hiding his scar almost completely. His hair is disheveled. The sight hurt - he had wanted to see Will this way, wake with him. He had never dared hope that Will might feel the same way, that he might even be sexually interested. Looking at the two men now, in their morning routine stung him in a way he had never imagined possible.

He pushes the thoughts down. No need to dwell. Will had enacted his reckoning, pulling them both over the bluff and now he loves another man - another reckoning that Will is surely unaware of. But it has at least an equal and damaging effect on Hannibal's psyche, dare he say, his heart.

Even so, his heart lightens for a moment at the sight before sinking as Will reenters the house. This is the closest he has dared get in years. But it is the same every time. That glimpse of Will lifting his spirits. And as soon as he is gone Hannibal is plagued with the same dark thoughts he has been drowning in since the fall from the bluff. Will rejected him then, he had no intention of letting him do the same again.

For now he would watch.

5 Years 7 Months Earlier

The agony was almost too much to bear.

The physical pain was nothing to the loss of Will.

Hannibal had seen his body smashed on the rocks. As hard as he had tried to clutch to him, Will had fallen from his arms as they dropped - Hannibal into the ocean, Will onto the outcropping. The pull of the tide was too strong that, as the water swelled around him and threatened to fill his lungs, he was unable to fight the waves and swim to Will.
With every glance he was further from the rocks, further from Will. With every glance the sea threatened to pull him under. Before long he was turned around and there was only darkness as he tried to keep his head above water.

Why? Why, Will?

His mind roiled as the ocean. Why ask? He knew well enough - Will was not ready for the beauty of his own becoming. He had seen it in Will's eyes - his want, his need for them to be together. And for Will that meant in death. But he had not fully succeeded in fulfilling his intentions.

It was over. Will was gone. He had lived before Will, but he knew he could not live after. They had both known they would never survive each other and this had been Will's choice. For them to die. Hannibal found he was happy to oblige.

With the image of Will's broken body imprinted in his mind - set to fill every room in his memory palace as the ocean sought to fill him - he let the waves wash over and into him. He let the water drag him under, thinking it somehow poetic that he should be swallowed by the sea as he had once been swallowed whole by Will Graham.

5 Years 6 Months Earlier

“Hannibal.”

The voice called him back from the darkness. It was familiar and light and he knew it meant that he had lived. He cursed it.

“Chiyoh?” His voice broke over the word, dry throat straining.

“You are weak, you must rest.”

“Where am I?”

Silence then and he wasn’t entirely sure whether he had been claimed once more by sleep. Certainly his body had ached with a bone weary exhaustion that did not seem altered from one moment to the next.

He had opened his eyes but remained in near darkness. By the little moonlight that came through a gap in thin and ugly curtains, he took in his surroundings. The light was enough to see the room - small and sparse. There was a smell of antiseptic and some sort of home cooking - a stew perhaps. Both aromas mixing together in a way of cold care meeting home comfort that took him, for one brief moment, back to his childhood and the orphanage.

Chiyoh stood to the side of his bed, a wet cloth in hand and he was unsure how long she had been stood there, she may have only just arrived. She moved and dabbed the cloth at his forehead and he felt relief he hadn’t realised he needed.

“You will be fine. Your wound became infected but the fever broke last night. You will be well in time.”

His eyes had adjusted enough now to take in more - the threadbare blanket that covered him, the rickety bed frame. He pushed the blanket down and could make out the clean and well attended bandage over his bullet wound.

“I removed the bullet and stitched the wound.” A momentary pause. “I will bring you food.”

Hannibal didn’t answer. What could he say? He didn’t care that his wound had been cared for; that a fever hadn’t taken him; whether he ate or not. None of this mattered. Perhaps once he would have considered it rude to say as much to someone providing him care, as little as he might want it. In truth he would never disrespect Chiyoh by rejecting her or her assistance.

When she reached the wooden door, opening it to let a soft light pour in that Hannibal had to squint against, she turned and seemed to hesitate for a moment as though trying to decide whether to tell him something.

“Your *Nakama*... You should know, Will Graham - he is alive.”

Hannibal’s breath and heart stilled and might, he imagined, have stopped altogether.

5 Years 3 Months Earlier

“This is dangerous Hannibal. I will not assist you in this. They will not cage you, they will kill you.”

“Duly noted.” His words were not unkind as he took the map from her hands. He was surprised she had gone along with any of this - using his private means and connections to ensure his discreet return to the United States.

I… only intended to repay a debt. I saved you. I told you before that I would watch over you, but now the debt is repaid. And I cannot watch you if you are dead.”

That debt had hung between them so many years. Since her childhood. She had been his aunt’s maid until, as a teenager, she had been sent back to Japan for an arranged marriage that befit her station. It was not as she wanted, and Hannibal had seen to her return to the estate of his family. But by then life had changed, horrors had happened, and there she had remained, guarding one of the criminals who had killed… who had eaten…

He could no longer entertain the thoughts - his mind was too fragile. He had known he would be unable to deal with Will’s death, he had wanted the ocean to take him. But knowing he was alive but out of reach was… equally painful. He could not let himself fall into a rabbit hole of thoughts of Mischa at this time.

“Do you listen to me Hannibal? I am leaving.”

“Chiyoh. I am not blind to the fact that you have been as much a prisoner these many years and I would not seek to chain you further.” He knew his words sounded cold but they were merely numb, as all his words had been since she had fished him from the Atlantic. Still watching over him as she had watched over her prisoner before.

She rose from her chair at the old wooden table in the Canadian cabin she had secreted them in some weeks before.

He stood and grabbed her hand, turning it over in his and placing a kiss on the back of it. “You may have repaid your debt Chiyoh, I fear I will never repay mine.”

“You never need to.” Her smile was faint and her words meant goodbye. He swallowed the lump in his throat. Her hand slid from his and she took the bag she had placed by the door before quietly slipping out through it and into the world. The last of his past was gone in that instant.

He looked down at the table. Map, half eaten apple, some papers, and Will. His sleeping face gracing the cover of a months old Tattle Crime that Chiyoh had as her source of information. It was well thumbed now, every detail pored over and analysed. Every word barbed and dripping in poison, and yet he was nothing but thankful for Ms Lounds. Will would not likely appreciate her having snuck into his hospital room whilst he was unconscious - again. But Hannibal would be eternally grateful.

As the light began to fade he looked away from the image. No matter how he stared the eyes never opened, not even in his mind. And if there was one thing he would do before giving him his final wish and disappearing from Will Graham’s life forever, it was to at the least see

that face in person once more. He carefully tore the cover from the magazine and folded it before placing it in his breast pocket - he would take it with him in the morning.

He had been neither surprised nor offended that Chiyoh did not care for his plan to return to the United States. It was a risk he was willing to take but there was no reason for her to be so compelled. As he moved through the hospital in a porter's uniform in the deathly quiet of 3am, he wondered himself how prudent it was for not the first time.

But he had to *see* Will, know that he was truly alive - even if it were to be the last time he ever saw him.

The room was easy enough to find from the bay listings. He only realised he had been staring through the small window at a sleeping form when a healthcare assistant walked past with a trolley of medication. She did not stop at Will's room but did glance at him for a moment. He gave a slight smile and pulled up a cleaning cloth, starting to wipe the window. She returned the smile without stopping. Once she reached the end of the corridor he tried the handle and quietly let himself into the room.

He pocketed the cloth and moved to the foot of the bed, picking up the chart and flipping through it quickly. He realised, from the slowly forming tight ache, that his jaw was clenched tight as he read of Will's extensive injuries, the medically induced coma, his recovery plan. He was out of danger now, allowed to come around from the coma - which he had. He was healing, as soon as the medication courses were deemed suitable to be changed from IV to oral he would be moved to a recovery centre.

There was a gentle noise, not quite a snore, and Will stirred. A deeper noise then, followed by heavy breathing as Will began to toss slightly in the bed.

A nightmare.

Hannibal hadn't planned to touch Will. And yet, his hands ached to reach out and soothe him.

He had just needed to see for himself that he was fine. He had needed to read the chart and be reassured that Will was alive, would live. That would be the end of it. That was all he needed. Then he would leave Will be. Will had made his feelings clear when he had tried to kill them both. He had brought out Will's true self and that was all he had strived for. He had hoped, but never expected his love to be returned. He wasn't even truly surprised that Will had tried to kill him. He would leave and start over. Give Will the peace he had sought even if it made his own existence desolate.

Will had no peace now as he tossed and turned, a few muffled noises broke through panted breath. His skin had developed a sweaty sheen and droplets beaded at his brow.

And despite the stitches, the rawness of his wounds; despite the unkempt hair and beard; despite the slowly soaking sweat - Will Graham was beautiful.

Hannibal was frozen to the spot as he watched. The medication on the chart made it unlikely Will would wake, and yet he wished he would. He still wished he could see those eyes one

last time. In truth, he wanted Will to wake and press himself into his arms again, even if it meant falling all over again. Even if it meant dying. Dying together.

“No.” The word was barely audible as Will twisted in his sheets. “Don’t…”

Don’t what Will?

Hannibal realised he’d taken a step closer. Will clenched his fists in the bed sheet and tensed, his jaw tight, muscles straining. Hannibal ached. He had never been able to help Will with his nightmares. But that was a lie - he had never tried. Had used the empath’s quirks and problems alike to bring out what he had desired. He was suddenly overwhelmed by a heavy feeling that had visited him few times since childhood.

Guilt.

Unexpected. Unwanted. But as he watched Will and realised he could have helped this man, as a psychiatrist could have assisted in some way - should have. What else could he feel? If he were to have any human feeling on the matter.

“Please….” the word was long and breathed out on a moan that drew Hannibal closer still.

Hannibal didn’t realise that he had placed his hand on Will’s chest until he saw it before his eyes. The skin was hot and sticky, but not feverish. Will stilled for a moment and Hannibal worried that he might wake after all. And then what? What did either of them have to say to each other? There was nothing Hannibal could confess that Will would welcome.

Will murmured again, lightly this time - his features easing and muscles loosening. His breathing was returning to normal, Hannibal’s hand having apparently shifted him beyond the nightmare he was stuck in.

“Please…” A barely identifiable word in a barely identifiable whisper. Hannibal felt his chest and throat tighten with emotion. Desire. Need. Love.

On uttering the word, Will’s lips had remained slightly parted. Hannibal was mesmerised by them for a moment. By the thought of kissing them. Of being kissed by them.

He was back on the bluff again as he was in his own nightmares. Always embracing, always falling. Sometimes there was a kiss before or during the fall and those nightmares were the worst. The reality he could cope with, but his imagination taunting him with something that never was and never would be, left him devastated.

“Why, Will?” he whispered. At one time he might have wanted to wrap his hands around that exposed throat and squeeze for the power the man had over him, the vulnerability he caused. He wasn’t sure how to feel about the fact that this was not something he desired now, though with anyone else he might have.

Love makes you blind. To everything it would seem - from a slight to murder. Rudeness washed over and off of Will Graham, that was something Hannibal was not blind to but nor was it intentional. Would he let Will get away with anything?

He looked at the throat and knew he need only slide his hand up. There would be no resistance. His hand moved up the sweat slick skin and rested lightly around Will's throat. The motion caused Will to arch slightly into the touch and whimper with a frown. Would the sea be choking him in his dreams as it did in Hannibal's?

"Goodbye William."

Hannibal moved his hand up to grasp Will's jaw and leaned in. It wasn't so much of a kiss as a brush of his wet lips over dry, warm ones.

He hadn't intended to touch Will Graham. Hadn't intended to kiss him. But then Will Graham did make life rather unpredictable.

He closed the door quietly behind him with no intention of seeing the man, his beloved, again. He would miss Will Graham, but he would never seek him out again. Never find him, never look for him. He didn't want to know where he was or what he was doing. He didn't want to think about Will Graham - the pain was too unbearable.

To Will Graham, as the rest of the world, he would remain deceased.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Perhaps Hannibal was changed by Will more than he realised. Now struggling to stay away from Will as he had intended, he discovers the man has practically ceased to exist. Where is Will Graham?

Chapter Notes

This chapter beta'd by the amazing Victorine - thanks lovely <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

5 Years 2 Months Earlier

Hannibal woke in the middle of the night from a dream. A nightmare. They came often now. Dreams of the ocean swallowing him, swallowing Will. Dreams of being dragged down by some vengeful sea god who took revenge for The Dragon. His dreams had become fairytale in quality - sometimes Dolarhyde was adorned with wings and surrounded by fire, but in the nightmares, even as a man, he killed Will over and over. Recurring nightmares plagued him for the first time since childhood. Recurring waking thoughts of Will haunted his days. No matter how hard he tried to forget and move on, to leave Will alone, he was unable.

That night Hannibal killed Will.

He woke covered in a sheen of sweat, tangled in damp bed sheets. He promptly vomited over the side of the bed as the room spun around him. Hannibal sat and tried to right himself as his body trembled. He scrubbed a hand roughly over his face to discover it was wet from tears as much as sweat. He felt wrung out by emotions he usually let wash over him. Or around him, more accurately.

He had dragged Will over the cliff as they professed their love for each other. He held Will to his chest as both their lungs filled with water and they were taken by the dark currents of the ocean.

On waking his lungs and throat burned. He knew that he had been screaming Will's name. Chiyoh had told him in the cabin he had done the same during his nightmares. This had been familiar - he had similarly been informed by bunk mates that he screamed Mischa's name as he slept.

He had been a child then and had considered that a greater part of his heart had died with her. Of course he knew the cruel truth of it now. It had not died, it had become dormant. It had waited as Hannibal had not known he waited. What it had finally found, what had rekindled it into life and let itself be known by a dull, aching thud that day in Jack Crawford's office, was Will Graham.

He stifled a sob that rose unbidden from his chest. How could he suffer life without the only person who truly knew and understood him? He had never been lonely before Will. Before he had been *seen*.

*

It wasn't as he had planned, and yet he wasn't surprised. Could he be surprised that his interest in Will Graham was not so easily quashed? Perhaps obsession would be a better word. Undoubtedly, his love.

So although he hadn't planned to be seen, to be discovered and found to be alive he remained unmoved by his own actions. Perhaps on a subconscious level he had wanted this? As a student of the mind he would not try and fool himself otherwise. When he had been clearly recognised by the police officer near the market he could have fled. His life here was set up in such a way to allow it. He could have been in Europe or Canada within a day. And yet he had not.

When the man's eyes had squinted and then widened with the stages of his recognition, Hannibal instead had one thought. His mind had cleared of the multitude of ongoing activity within and focused in on one, singular, image - Will Graham. He stood victorious, dripping blood and towering over the body of The Dragon. Vital and fierce. That image clarified into a truth - he had to let Will know that he was alive.

He had removed himself from Will's life, taking any choice from the man - something that had been common in their relationship but was perhaps no longer appropriate and certainly unnecessary. Will had tried to kill them, tried to kill him. If Will knew he was alive would he seek him out as he had once said he would not?

Will had told him then that he would not look for him. Would the same be true now? If Will did seek him would it be to finally finish his attempt and kill him? Although Hannibal did not welcome death, he did not fear it, and to die at Will's hands felt like a fitting end. He was not ignorant to what he had put Will through for his own ends and to bring out Will's true self. He would not blame Will if his hatred and desire for some sort of vengeance ran deep.

Hannibal could have walked away and instead did not. Instead he moved casually through the market whilst maintaining a reasonable distance from the officer he knew was following him. Only once he was sure the sighting had been reported - at the least a flattering confirmation that he remained high on Interpol's Most Wanted list despite his presumed death - had he then slunk away down the back streets he had familiarised himself with on arriving in the town.

*

Hannibal watched from a distance as a Crime Scene Tech team arrived. Even at a good distance he didn't dare stay too long, and his mind threatened to throw him into nostalgic recollections of his own professional capacity at crime scenes - most especially the ones with Will.

And really, wasn't Will what all this was about? Hadn't everything been about him since almost the very moment they met?

They would find his prints, perhaps some DNA and he had not a single doubt that this information - the revelation that he yet lived - would get back to Will Graham. He just needed Will to know. That would be enough. He expected nothing of the man, he just needed him to know the truth even if it meant compromising his own safety and secrecy.

A month, he reflected. Only a month had he been able to live with the idea of Will Graham not knowing he had agency in the world.

5 Years 1 Month Earlier

As Hannibal had predicted, his sighting was the front page of the very next issue of Tattle Crime. An older but reasonably flattering photo of himself occupied the front page, but inside he found a small insert regarding Will - *The Ripper's last known victim, former profiler Will Graham, could not be reached for comment.* The rest of course was trite nonsense speculating on how bad his injuries were that they kept him from responding, or perhaps the FBI had issued a gag order whilst Jack Crawford was still under investigation. As if Will would ever want to give them a comment.

Ms Lounds, perhaps as a taunt, had reused the photo she had illicitly taken of Will when he had been hospitalised after Hannibal had… His finger traced across the page, running the line of the scar beneath the bandaging in the photograph. A swell of possessive need rose in his chest. If she had used this picture perhaps she hoped to provoke a response from Will, or because she knew it wouldn't.

A sudden worry descended. Could there be more serious reasons why Will had not accepted Ms Lounds invitation to comment? He shook the thought away as ridiculous - moments earlier he had mentally acknowledged that Will would refuse to lower himself to comment on anything being published by Tattle Crime. Even so...

Nightmares continued to plague Hannibal throughout the fortnight that he travelled slowly from South America back into the United States. He used the opportunity to grow his beard out, obtain new clothes. His aesthetic was perhaps closer to that of Will Graham - unassuming and typically American. He had already stopped styling his hair though it was starting to grow out from the manageably short length it had been kept in the BSHCI.

Despite obscuring his appearance, he understood the dangers of returning to the States. The same dangers Chiyoh had not needed to warn him about only two months earlier.

Two months.

The separation made it feel like a lifetime. In the two weeks of travelling, the two weeks since he had woken one morning and decided that he must once more see Will Graham - he had considered this a great deal. He initially told himself that it was to ensure Will knew he was alive. His lack of comment in Tattle Crime was realistically indicative of nothing other than good taste and yet it niggled at him. It ate away inside like necrosis, until everything within him was consumed by a fear for Will's continued health and safety. He toyed occasionally with the idea that it was perhaps too because he wanted to see what Will's reaction would be, what he would do with the knowledge that Hannibal lived.

As the days passed and the distance between them lessened, Hannibal stopped trying to hide the truth from himself. That try as he might to let Will exist beyond his reach, he - selfishly - could not live without him. He wasn't really sure what that meant in that moment. He just needed to see Will again.

4 Years 11 months Earlier

"Good afternoon, this is Bob Greer at Universal Insurance, I have some details to discuss with Mr Will Graham regarding his policy. Would you be so kind as to connect me to his room?"

It had been remarkably easy for someone with a polite and smooth phone manner to find that Will had been moved from the hospital directly to a recovery centre. It had taken some strength of will not to immediately drive across two states to be there. Hannibal allowed a small smile at the thought, perhaps this was how it felt for teenagers in love? He recalled the chart and the noted injuries, especially the extensive surgeries required for Will's leg, and knew recovery would be slow and arduous.

"I'm sorry, Mr Graham has already been discharged. You will have to contact him at his home."

Hannibal hung up the phone, dispensing with any further pleasantries. He wondered if the FBI had taken the precaution of bugging Will's home line. If they hadn't before they might have decided to do so once they knew he was still alive. The risk involved was becoming greater by the moment and yet Hannibal found it difficult to care. He felt so close and yet still so far from his… from Will.

Hannibal replaced the receiver and lay back on the lumpy motel bed. His palm where he had held the phone was clammy and he was aware that his pulse was slightly quicker than usual. He was unsure whether that had started when he had placed the call or once it had been answered. He thought for a moment about Will leaving the recovery centre and his heart skipped a little, perhaps in answer.

A few minutes passed and Hannibal became aware that he was grinding his teeth. He stopped immediately, but the underlying anxiety that had caused it flared within him. It was perhaps made worse by the fact that he was fully aware of how irrational and uncontrolled he had become. Within the space of weeks he had gone from deciding to never see Will Graham again, through letting him know he was alive, to tracking him down as he had promised himself he would not do. He was growing concerned with what he might do next. He was sure he had no idea whatsoever. His own behaviour, in the wake of his separation from Will,

had become unpredictable even to himself. Objectively he wondered if it was some sort of personality crisis or a breakdown. Either way, it was exacerbated by the knowledge that Will had already been discharged.

The chart of information that Hannibal had looked over at the hospital had a much longer recovery plan laid out. The leg injuries alone would involve months of rehabilitation. Perhaps Will was unhappy with being held in the recovery centre and had insisted instead on being rehabilitated at home. It wouldn't be wholly impossible and Will would have the comfort of his dogs and the serenity of his house as it sat in the field as a boat on the water.

The slight smile that had played across his lips stilled as a thought spiked ice through him. Will's home was no longer Wolf Trap, it was Maine. With his family. The fact settled within him and it felt like he had once more been shot, but instead of warm blood flowing from his gut, it was cold bitterness.

4 Years 10 Months Earlier

Further, less intrusive enquiries were fruitless. There was little he could do to ascertain more information about Will than he had already tried. It was as though he had simply vanished from Baltimore. Hannibal's heart sank knowing that the only remaining possibility was that Will had indeed returned to the soft bosom of his family.
In truth, Hannibal had hesitated before following, though his heart allowed him no other option in the end. He had hesitated in part because of the risk - it was likely just as well watched as Wolf Trap would have been. But also because he knew he had to stop and question himself.

Yes, he wanted to know Will was healthy and recovering. He wanted to know if Will knew he was alive, even if he had to leave his own copy of Tattle Crime in their post box. Yes, he wanted to know what resulting actions the knowledge would invoke. And of course, he wanted them to be together, as unrealistic as that was. Realistically, he was willing to settle for less. Much,much less. But he also wanted Will to be happy. And considering the man had tried to enact a murder-suicide and had apparently been living a charmed life during Hannibal's incarceration, he had to consider that this might be what made Will happy.

Although he knew different, Hannibal managed to convince himself that going to the house in Maine - the one he had memorised the address of in order to unleash the Great Red Dragon on the family - was purely in order to ensure Will was recovering. He would maintain a distance, he reasoned whilst also deep inside acknowledging that if the opportunity presented itself he would reveal himself to Will. Consequences be damned.

The first three days that he staked out the house there was no one home. On the fourth day in the late afternoon a car arrived and the woman and her child alighted and went into the house. A short time later someone arrived on foot, a neighbour perhaps, with several dogs in tow. One Hannibal recognised as Will's dog - Winston.
A further two weeks passed with no sign of Will, and despite his investigations - including on one occasion letting himself carefully into the empty house to see if he could find any information - he discovered nothing. What he was almost completely sure of was that Will had never returned here, when he had left Baltimore.

The thought worried Hannibal immensely. His injuries had not been life threatening, but the thought that Will was gravely injured somewhere, or had in fact died, filled him with a sickly cold dread. So much so that he considered approaching the woman more directly for information, even if it meant taking her hostage. That eventuality had proved unnecessary one afternoon.

A diminutive but hard looking woman who strangely reminded him somewhat of Miriam Lass, had arrived at the house.
For not the first time, Hannibal made a silent approach and secreted himself under the house, crawling under the flooring until he located the room in which the women now talked.

“I suppose I don’t really have a say - Winston is Will’s dog. If he wants him… I just…”

“Mrs Graham, truly, I am sure I do not understand the situation you find yourself in, but you do have my utmost sympathies and if I can assist in any way-”

“That’s kind Agent Starling, but… I can’t get involved in Will’s life. I’m grateful that you were able to tell me about witness protection, but Will and I… well, it’s over and as much as I might have wanted to stay in touch in some way or say goodbye at least… this is… It removes that option and I think that’s ok too.” She sounded worn and exasperated but not as bitter as her words might suggest. “I can’t blame him that he wants someone there with him. Someone, something close…” A low chuckle from the woman then, a clear and honest amusement - “I knew that really, he could happily make do with a canine family.” Fondness in those words that both comforted and angered Hannibal at the familiarity.
As he struggled with the uncharacteristic disconnect and lack of control with his emotions, he realised he had missed some of the conversation and the other woman was leaving. He moved around so that he could watch the front of the house from his foot level vantage point. He noted she left without the dog.

It was three more days before anything further happened. In that time Hannibal had returned only briefly to his hole up and retrieved his scant belongings - a few clothes and essentials and the picture of Will ripped from Tattle Crime, placed on top of everything else in the hold all. He had taken to hiding in his small, innocuous car on the main road - relying on it rather than travelling on foot as he previously had.

On that third day this decision had proved fortuitous. A van had pulled down the drive and Hannibal had cautiously followed it on foot. He was able to get close enough to see the woman hand over the dog to the two men in the van.

When the dog was leashed, Hannibal walked quickly back to his car, and when the van had pulled away from the property he had followed.

4 Years 8 Months Earlier

Hannibal had taken to watching the house more regularly with every passing week. From the dense woods it was not that difficult. On three occasions Winston, who Will had let out to relieve himself, had happened upon him and the result had been favourable. The first time he had been prepared to head further back into the woods and avoid silencing the animal, but he found he had not needed to. The dog appeared to recognise him and gave one sharp yelp of

excitement but then calmed and hushed when Hannibal quietly commanded, before he had been promptly drawn back to the house by Will's whistle. The subsequent times they had encountered one another the dog had greeted him as an old friend - accepting head rubs and small dog treats that Hannibal had started to bring with him in anticipation.

No Winston today. A car was already in the drive when Hannibal arrived and he moved to better his view. He recognised it as the vehicle belonging to Will's physiotherapist. His identity had become clear after several sessions had taken place in the back yard, unobscured by house walls. Those had been comparatively cool days when the Californian sun could be enjoyed without the need for air-conditioning.

The session on this day must have already taken place because within moments of his arrival, Will and the other man had appeared on the front porch and seemed to be saying goodbye to each other. Will stretched his leg a couple of times, the other man nodded. He could make out neither's words but they were perhaps discussing the therapy. And then they stood in silence for a moment. And in that moment a blush rose up Will's neck and cheeks and he rubbed a hand over the back of his neck as though nervous. The other man was looking down, studying his shoes. It was an odd tableau that Hannibal wasn't fully understanding of until Will moved again.

Quickly and decisively Will closed the space between them and pressed his lips to the other man's. Chaste but lasting more than a few moments. The men smiled at each other, almost bashfully, and Hannibal felt his heart drop. A heavy, stone weight in his chest.

He was numb.

He experienced none of the irrational impulses that he had come to realise so often accompanied his more passionate emotional experiences. Instead he was still as the men went their separate ways and the image was left to replay over and over, seeming almost as an echo, unwillingly filling the corridors of his mind palace.

Chapter End Notes

Please note: The next update is due to go up the w/e of 24/25 Sept but I'm actually going to be away on holiday and I don't know what my net access will be... so it may go up late. Apologies <3

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Hannibal settles into a new life of his own in Pasadena - parallel to Will Graham's, and perhaps closer than Will knows.

Chapter Notes

This chapter beta'd by the amazing Victorine - thanks lovely <3

4 Years 4 Months Earlier

"Gio." The high voice cut through Hannibal like a sharp blade and he decided to take a moment before answering, though apparently not before Chad Wilson felt the need to pester him further. "Hey, Gio, man, this isn't the usual bread. What happened to the usual bread?"

Hannibal grit his teeth, settling his expression into something neutral before turning from chopping the chives, to face the *other* chef at The Bistro Near The Beach. If such a word could be used for someone who woke one day and decided they wanted to be a chef, watched the Food Channel for a week and had the good fortune to be close friends with the hippy owner of a small bistro. Dealing with someone called Chad was not something Hannibal had envisaged in his future when he had run his own practice in Baltimore, but spending time cooking was enjoyable. The same lacking owner gave him a lot of creative freedom with the menu. Which was a consolation at least for having to put up with such a cretin.

He finally put down his knife and turned to Chad with a stern look, as he might look at a child who refused any progression of their intellect. "This bread is what the dish calls for." He said no more, not in the habit of justifying himself, but he did wait to accept Chad's response.

"Oh. Ok, cool man." Chad walked over to another station in the compact kitchen and stood there, perhaps bewildered, as he certainly seemed to often have no idea what he was doing. Usually staring at vegetables and unsure what to do with them. Hannibal sighed at the incompetence but could take heart in the fact that soon it would be time for Chad's break, during which he'd likely get high and spend the rest of the day on the beat up sofa in the staff room.

After a few moments, Hannibal turned back to his chives. As he turned, Jessica, one of the waitresses – a college student making her way – came through the swinging door to drop off

some used plates.

“Compliments from table 12, Gio.” She smiled at him, which he returned gladly.

And just for the moment that he watched the door swing, he could glimpse beyond – past the few tables and one sofa, to the al fresco dining area outside where Will sat with his boyfriend. As they did every Sunday at this time. He allowed himself to soak in the view for that short moment before the door swung closed and he returned to preparing the herbs.

*

“Morning Gio. How is it today?”

“A little stiff this week.” Hannibal rolled his shoulder. It was an old injury from when he’d fought with Jack in Florence and in truth it didn’t give him too much pain. All his physical pain was manageable – everything that he had gained over the years and ignored. As he grew older they ached more and gave him more discomfort, made worse by the dull ache he still felt in his side from The Dragon’s bullet. But nothing he couldn't manage himself.

He would freely acknowledge to himself that the reason for seeking out a physiotherapist had not been to deal with the aches and pains that he would gladly have continued to ignore. Though he found he was glad for the relief he had helped gain from his sessions with Brad Jackson.

A week.

A week he had been able to stay away from Will after seeing them together on his porch.

A week he had spent in the motel room he had acquired, trying to reason with himself that it was time to go. To leave Will to his happiness and accept it. But the realisation that he had nowhere else to go hit him harder than he might have expected. Perhaps it was too hard to be alone again when he knew that Will was still in the world, even if he could only have him from a distance. These thoughts were pushed down.

Hannibal resolved to stay. For Will, he tried to convince himself. Until he was sure that Will were truly happy and settled. Until he knew that the becoming he had brought about had been an illusion – that he had impressed that side of himself on the empath after all - Will had mirrored the killer inside of him rather than truly been a killer himself. That he hadn’t seen an equal monster in Will at all, had only seen what he wanted to and then moulded the man to it. The idea made him sick. The things he had done to Will… Could it be that after all this time, he had made Will what he was rather than brought out what was already inside him?

Do you think you could change me? As I changed you?

If he truly had been mistaken in Will then there was much more in his life he had to question. An investigation into himself that he was reluctant to make. And, perhaps he was mistaken; perhaps Will had let his beast retreat into himself; perhaps he was careful. Perhaps he had been fooling himself all along, letting feelings he never knew had existed within him surface and blind him to the truth.

Do you think you could change me?

He would wait, and watch. He would stay. He needed to know.

Following Mr Jackson had proved informative as his relationship with Will Graham had blossomed. He found himself looking for some excuse to separate them, but every time he saw a light touch between them, the look of adoration in Brad's eyes, the smiles that grew on Will's beautiful face – it became impossible. After everything he had done, how could he take such happiness from Will? Even if the beast within him raged as he longed to be the recipient of those smiles.

He knew in a more irrational time of his life, a small number of years ago in Baltimore, had there been a Brad then he might have easily killed him. Maybe even fed Will his heart in a sumptuous meal that he hoped might court Will's affections.

The realisation that not only did he not want to kill Brad, but was certain he didn't want to kill anyone, didn't disturb him. It was something he had felt pressing inside him. Making excuses at first and yet there were many he had crossed since the fall that would have made his menu at a previous time.

The difference was Will.

If he killed, if he was caught, if he himself were killed, then he would lose Will, and Will would lose him without any knowledge of it. The thought stabbed at him, the thought of Will never knowing.

But there was more to it than that, he knew. Something that he still didn't want to think about too much because it changed him more greatly than he was able to process. But the truth was, as Mischa's death had given teeth to the beast within him, killing with Will had refined him and narrowed his view. It had been a singular experience to which there would never be an equal. He could make every excuse possible, but deep down he knew he would never kill again without Will Graham at his side.

If that was never to happen, so be it. If only he could have a connection to Will in some small way.

It had been surprisingly easy to get a job in the kitchen of The Bistro Near The Beach, a place he found Brad frequented regularly. First he had tidied himself up, having let his appearance take on that of a tramp for want of a better term. His hair was now shot through almost completely with grey and he had let it grow long and shaggy so that it needed to be tucked behind his ears. His beard was a mix of dark and grey and unkempt. His clothes were nondescript findings from goodwill. Such an appearance not only helped him blend in, it helped him go unnoticed as so few people would look directly at the vagrant they took him for. In truth he had access to funds, could even afford much better than the run-down motel he had called home for many months now, but he knew of no quicker way to get caught than to live the lifestyle to which he had grown accustomed. And he was nothing if not adaptable.

For the first time in many months, he had visited a barber – his beard was trimmed neatly and his hair cut into an actual style, though still long enough to tuck behind his ears. He knew this

would require him to wear a hairnet in any kitchen job, which he found distasteful on some levels, but also knew it could help disguise him further. He had bought more clothes from goodwill, but this time from the smarter rails. A suit that was ever so slightly ill-fitting. When he tried it on he knew it was perfect because he felt his reflection taunting him, laughing at him.

He had chosen amongst the aliases he'd bought previously, and decided on Giovanni Russo. His Italian was good enough to pass as native to all those who weren't. To those who were he took the precaution of a back story that included an unsettled childhood of joint custody over a continent. Italian father, Lithuanian mother – divorced when he was ten years old.

He had gone in one day with his *new* clothes, tidied hair and beard, an appropriate resume, a sob story of hard times, and a charm that was yet to fail him. Three days later he was their new cook. Within a month he had the kitchen in the best shape it had ever been, the menu tweaked here and there to make the slightest of improvements. Though it came only with prestige and no pay rise, the owner decided to redesignate the position to chef, rather than cook, even so Hannibal appreciated the acknowledgement of his value.

He had waited three weeks before making small talk with Brad. Hannibal rarely left the kitchen; certainly a consideration was running into Will, who would surely recognise him regardless of superficial attributes. Sometimes however, someone would ask about a recipe or ingredient, or pass on their compliments and Hannibal would take the time to speak with them in person - a vanity, he knew. On a Sunday mid-morning that had Brad eating brunch with a small number of friends, a woman had asked about the recipe used for the scrambled eggs as she had never been able to get them to taste so good. Hannibal had taken the opportunity presented – talked to the woman, passed Brad's table, reached for the napkin that had fallen to the floor beside the table - that in fact he'd had in his hand the whole time. But this gave him chance to make a slight noise and wince at the pain in his shoulder. Brad immediately asked if he was ok. At first Hannibal had apologised and been politely dismissive, then there was a short conversation and it had been easy to manoeuvre such a charmingly nice man that the conversation ended with Hannibal having Brad's business card in hand.

Later that night he had sat in his hotel room, turning the card over in his hands. Thinking about a rolodex once full of business cards. Thinking about how pliant Brad Jackson was, how easy he would be to manipulate if Will so chose.

Hannibal had since made regular appointments with Brad, and they had become friendly though nothing more than professional – just passing polite conversation during their sessions. Hannibal had told Brad some personal information regarding his injuries and his past – all of which was entirely contrived. Over time Brad had dropped in small snippets of personal information – "sorry to have booked so late on a Friday night, I hope I'm not ruining your weekend plans?" – "no not at all, my boyfriend and I are going fishing next weekend so this weekend is going to be shopping for supplies, I'm glad to have an excuse to put that off." They had smiled and lightly laughed. It had given Hannibal the opportunity he required. Very occasionally he would ask polite but not intrusive questions about the boyfriend, the first being that Brad never seemed to bring him to The Bistro and maybe he should.

Hannibal was full of an anxious trepidation as he waited for Brad to bring Will, as he did a week later. Hannibal was careful of course and even berated himself, knowing he should never have suggested it, that the risk involved was too great. And yet he had to see Will beyond the now infrequent trips to the woods by his house with a pocket full of homemade dog treats. See him out in the world to truly understand if he had been mistaken or not. Which he surely had, he thought, except… sometimes there was that look in Will's eyes - behind Will's eyes - that even from a distance Hannibal recognised.

Although on some level it pained him, he was truly glad that Will was happy, that Brad made him happy in a way he was sure he never could. So it had been with some self admonishment that he had booked this appointment after Brad had started to come to the Bistro without Will once more. He had waited three weeks. He had returned to watching Will at his home more regularly and found him there and well. He no longer found them in each other's company and it, strangely, worried him greatly.

He let Brad complete the session, his shoulder actually feeling much better after the 40 minute slot, when he asked what had been on his mind for weeks –
"You haven't brought your boyfriend to the Bistro lately, I hope it isn't the changes to the menu that have put him off." He didn't have to put on the tone or expression of concern, even if the reason behind it was different.

"Oh! No, no. The food is as amazing as ever Gio… We… John and I broke up."

"I'm sorry Brad, it was rude of me to enquire. I do apologise." He bowed his head slightly and did his best to sound contrite despite the emotions raging within him. The happiness that he couldn't deny; the anger at himself for that; the fear and sadness that Will was once more alone in the world.

"Please, no. It's alright. I guess it just wasn't meant to be. He's a sweet guy, but…"

"Everyone has a past and issues that are hard to work through," he supplied kindly and, of course, knowingly.

"That's pretty much it. There was nothing I could do to make him truly happy. I'm not sure he's ever going to be over his ex and he's never going to be able to give himself over to someone else until he is. It makes me sad, I care about him and want him to be happy, even if not with me. But I just don't see that for him… I would suggest therapy if I didn't know how much of an issue that would be for him." Brad stopped and sighed and then apologised for unloading, which Hannibal waved off with a hand and a kind smile.

They said their goodbyes and Hannibal left. He didn't make it home before he needed to sit down. He didn't make it a block. He made it to one of the benches around the fountain in the pedestrian precinct of the mall next to Brad's office. He sat down and stared at the ever changing patterns of the water.

He had misjudged everything. He had failed to comprehend something so simple, so blinded had he been by his own emotions. He thought back to that look in Will's eyes after they had killed The Dragon, had he mistaken it? It didn't matter because the truth was in what

happened next – in Will trying to kill them both. And now Hannibal understood – Will was going to do anything to keep him from her, to keep her safe. This was all about that woman.

Despite the loss of appetite for such things, Hannibal felt a pang of regret that he had not killed his rival, the one who truly held Will's heart – Molly Graham.

3 Years 11 Month Earlier

He had stayed away from Will for two weeks. In some ways, he knew, though he had no right to it, it was a punishment for Will. For loving someone else. The absurdity of depriving someone of your company when they had no idea you were there, was not lost on Hannibal. But it wasn't for Will that he returned to his vigil, it was for himself. Regardless of how Will felt about him, or that woman, or any of the men he seemed to be parading through his life, he needed him. Hannibal knew his behaviour had become much like that of an addict. It bothered him less than it probably should.

Will's habits had changed since Brad had left his life, and Hannibal fit himself around it accordingly – changing his own hours at the Bistro where he no longer ever saw Will. No more working evenings at the weekends. Those were for Will.

And Will was going out a lot of weekends now, to various bars and clubs. He never left with a woman and Hannibal was unsure what to make of it. Trying to psychoanalyse Will was something that never worked. But could it be that his separation from the woman was so great that he could bear the company of no other woman but her? Instead seeking the company of men to fulfil the physical needs he had? Hannibal found it unlikely but was at a loss to explain the behaviour. Will Graham being unpredictable was something he should be used to by now.

At first Hannibal followed Will to these places in his car and waited on the street, never going in himself but waiting to watch Will leave – sometimes alone, sometimes with a man. If they returned to Will's house Hannibal tended to go home himself or to an all-night diner for some coffee. He knew he wouldn't be sleeping those nights. After a while, he began to discern the rough routine that he wasn't sure Will even knew he was setting – a certain order to the venues, rarely broken. Hannibal started to wait in the clubs for him – go on ahead and have a soft drink at the bar, watch Will enter, imagine being someone he didn't know – talking, flirting, going home together for the night, perhaps for more. Or being himself, finally revealing himself and Will accepting him. He scoffed at the idea and the image was usually replaced with one of Will stabbing him in the face with a smashed glass. He allowed none of these scenarios to play out. Instead, once Will arrived, he would quietly leave – sometimes he risked hanging around by the door a while to watch what Will did. Invariably he just went to the bar and was approached. He did not want for company. Of course he didn't, so beautiful. He felt angered that others were allowed to see that beauty, but consoled that none but he had seen him at his most radiant – dripping in blood that was black in the moonlight.

Those nights he would return to his car and wait – his set routine remaining much the same. He spent a lot of that time thinking about Brad Jackson, who he still kept appointments with. Brad had started to seem strangely happier without Will, and Hannibal wondered if he had met someone new. He never pried. Instead he spent time with a feeling it took him a while to identify as anxiety. He had grown accustomed to the idea of Will and Brad as a couple and

had in some way approved of the man. He had rarely met a kinder, nicer and more polite man. He knew he would treat Will well and was strangely irked that Will being unable to move on from the ill-fated relationship with that woman, had ruined it all.

And now Will filled his bed with pointless substitutes for her, or Brad in some sense perhaps. It sent small waves of anger through Hannibal but he was unsure where to aim them. Some, certainly, at himself for constantly wishing he were the substitute despite knowing that would never really be enough for him and would likely be abhorrent to Will.

He had been lost in such thoughts one evening, or rather closer to 2am, when Will left a club with a young man. The younger man hung off of Will, and whilst Will seemed to be maintaining an appropriate restraint, the other was practically grinding against him. Hannibal found it difficult to process the mix of emotions this brought up, though he was able to reasonably discern that the two dominant emotions were disgust and jealousy.

He started the car with the intention of following them at a discreet distance to the nearest taxi rank and seeing whose home they would depart for, when two men also began following them on foot. He hadn't been sure at first, but it became clear from the rigid distance they kept and the clenching and unclenching of their fists that something was amiss. It was when Will and his friend started past an alleyway that everything changed.

Suddenly the men were on them, dragging them into the darkness of the alley. Hannibal reacted reflexively, speeding the car to the top of the alley before slamming on his brakes and jumping out - not clearly registering what he was doing.

"Fucking homos." One of the thugs shouted as he threw Will's friend to the floor. The smaller man cowered and Will stepped in front to shield him. The younger man took the opportunity to pick himself up and run, quickly gone from the alley. The thugs laughed and one grabbed Will as the other moved forward.
By the time Hannibal realised what he was doing he was halfway to them. Even so, he did not hesitate as Will was held and struck – first in the face and then with force in the stomach causing him to double over.

Will groaned in pain. He had clearly had a few drinks, and with his leg irreparable he was not able to fend them off as he might once have done. It also meant that the strike to his face that had bruised an eye, might conceal Hannibal somewhat. Or so he considered the next day when he ran over the events in his mind. In truth, he had considered nothing at the time other than Will's safety, not even his own carefully crafted secret life.

Hannibal moved quickly and quietly as was second nature. As the men laughed and continued their disgusting slurs, he moved behind the one who had struck Will. A firm hand on the man's head and a swift push had the man's skull cracking against the brickwork of the alley wall. It certainly wasn't enough force to kill him, but enough to incapacitate the man.

This left him facing the other man and Will, who slumped in the assailant's arms. Hannibal wanted to take hold of Will, bring him close and shelter him. But he knew he couldn't. He knew he had no right to try and be for Will what he clearly did not want. Instead he struck out a fist to the man's throat. He promptly dropped Will, who slumped to the floor. The man stumbled back, clutching his throat and gasping for a breath that he could not draw, more

from the shock than injury. Hannibal advanced and grabbed him by the shirt, swinging him with force into the wall, against which he then fell.

And then Hannibal hesitated. Will lay motionless other than the heave of breathing; his rising and falling chest. He knew he should leave him, but he was plagued with concern that he might be more injured than he seemed, or the men might come to before him and take revenge. Hannibal moved to Will's side and knelt carefully, not wanting him to become aware of his presence in any way. Will didn't stir, not even as Hannibal removed Will's phone from his jacket pocket. He had rolled his sleeve down to cover his fingers so as not to leave prints, and then dialled 911.

In a clear and commanding voice he asked for an ambulance to be sent, that an attack had taken place and three men were injured. He left the line open and then placed the phone on Will's chest. He should leave, but couldn't. Instead he just watched Will for a few moments, his eyes closed and his face bruised but as beautiful up close as he remembered.

The realisation hit that he had not been this close to Will since he had visited him unconscious in hospital. He found he was desperate to lean in and kiss Will as he had then, but pushed the thoughts down. He couldn't even allow himself to consider these things in the moment. It was too dangerous, there were too many temptations. And yet he allowed one.

He lowered a hand gently to Will's face and stroked the back of his hand over beard and Dragon scar. His breath shuddered and he stilled his hand for a moment.
Hannibal took in a breath sharply as Will's eyes fluttered a little and his hand reached up and took Hannibal's. It fell back away immediately and Will's eyes rolled, clearly unable to focus – drawing a sharp pang of sadness in Hannibal though he knew he should feel relief.

He stood and left the alley as he heard the emergency vehicle sirens.

Hannibal easily settled into a strange new existence then, as Will Graham's watcher and protector. He had come to think of himself as perhaps somewhat of a guardian angel. If a fallen angel could be considered as such.

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Hannibal remains a shadow. There is a revelation.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long break. I had a lot going on and this one fell off my plate. So I wanted to wait until I had completed this before posting again. And I have, it is now complete and I will be posting it every Wednesday until done. Thanks for sticking with it everyone!

3 Years 10 Month Earlier

He'd waited outside the night and day and next night as Will recovered. He hadn't gone into the hospital - he knew it would have been too tempting to watch over him at night, and as Will was conscious this time, it was too risky. He'd watched from afar as the emergency services had arrived - followed the ambulance.

When Will left the hospital he didn't follow. It was enough to know he was well, or at least well enough. He'd held his side tightly, Hannibal suspected at least one broken rib, and his limp was more pronounced. It was as much as likely from the enforced bed rest making it stiffen up, as to any injuries he might have sustained in the alley.

He'd watched Will recover bit by bit. Sometimes from the woods, sometimes Winston sat with him until he was called back to the house.

Always the distance. Even though it was harder now. So much harder than it had ever been before, having been so close in the alley. Having held him. The thought simultaneously warmed and chilled Hannibal. It fulfilled him at the same time as bringing upon him a great sense of loss. He couldn't regret his actions, as impetuous as they had been, of course he couldn't - regardless of any ill effect they might have on him.

His life revolved more closely around Will's orbit now. He left the Bistro and took casual employment with a catering company. Really only to keep himself amused - give him something to do to allow his mind a break from his concern for Will. His recover was not going as well as anyone might hope. He seemed down. He was alone. They were both alone together, though the thought would give neither of them any kind of comfort.

He left his surveillance over Will on the Friday afternoon in order to ready himself for a job that evening. It should have been routine, but one of the sous chefs had not turned up and Hannibal stepped up from line cook. It had been pleasant, fun even, until the oaf of a dishwasher stumbled as he passed the prep stations, knocking into Hannibal and sending him to the floor. He landed awkwardly on his arm and felt a shooting pain up into his shoulder. He stood, jaw clenched against the pain, but continued nonetheless - finished the prep and cursed that this wouldn't have happened if the sous chef had not called sick.

The next morning Brad had been able to see him for an emergency appointment. Hannibal mused that it was the first time he had seen Brad with Will not at the fore of his mind, the pain too acute to consider the point further.

Until Brad brought it up.

They had gone through some exercises and Brad winced at Hannibal's pained expressions. "Ok Gio, this is beyond what we can do here. I think it's your rotator cuff, you need to see your doctor. In the meantime I recommend painkillers to keep it at bay. And rest!"

"Thank you." Hannibal had near huffed the words, drawing a comforting smile from Brad.

"I can tell you're not someone who usually lets physical pain slow you down, but… you're not getting any younger. If you're in pain it's because you're aggravating it and making it worse, so don't go doing anything over the top." Brad smiled.

Hannibal stood and was surprised that Brad seemed suddenly distant and hesitant as he made ready to leave.

"Is everything ok?" Hannibal asked, not wanting to seem rude but also perhaps even slightly interested in the answer.

"Oh, yeah. Yes, sorry. I was a million miles away. It's…" Brad looked at Hannibal for a moment and his smile turned part grimace. "My ex, he got beat up. He called me… He's coming here, about his leg. Did I tell you that's how we met? It's been playing him up since the attack and he wants to see someone familiar with his issues. Which I understand… and he's a nice guy. It's just… difficult." Brad shook his head. "I shouldn't be laying all this on you."

"Please, I've been told often that I'm a good listener." Hannibal gave a warm smile as he tried to crush down the strange feelings that fluttered within him at the unexpected disclosures.

"If I'm honest, I've been happier since we broke up. He… has a lot of issues that aren't going away and that he can't or won't deal with. I didn't realise how much that had affected me. And I just… I don't want him to think we can get back together. I told him over the phone this would just be professional, but it's hard when you're hurt and feeling vulnerable. I get it." Brad sighed and shrugged. "I'm just hoping he isn't coming here with some kind of expectation about us."

“I suggest honesty is the best policy.” Hannibal gave a reassuring smile. “Be up front, don’t mislead him. You must of course do what’s right for you.” Hannibal found himself meaning the words, Brad and Will were not a good match - whether Will realised it or not, one way or another he would eventually consume someone like Brad.

“Well. I hope it doesn’t come to it. We’ll see…” Brad trailed off but then looked bright, clearly just having had a thought. “Say, would you like to meet him? He’d be thrilled to meet you I think- he absolutely loved the food at the Bistro. Said it reminded him of home-cooked meals with good friends. And I wouldn’t mind having a third wheel to take the pressure off...”

“Thank him for the compliment, but I have errands to run for which I am already late thanks to this injury.” Hannibal grabbed his jacket with his good arm and replied calmly despite his heart wanting to pump faster at the idea of seeing Will.

“Oh, no problem. You may well meet him on the way out anyway - he should be here any minute.”

At that Hannibal’s blood chilled. He hadn’t realised that Brad had meant so immediately. His pulse quickened in that way that only Will Graham could cause. He opened his mouth to answer in the negative again when there was a knock on the outer door before it opened and they could both hear someone in the waiting room.

“That should be him. Give me a moment.” Brad left the room, closing the door almost completely.

Hannibal scanned the room for other exists. Something he’d done before - alway know where the exits are - and in this case there was the door that lead to the waiting room and the windows along the back wall. Hannibal paced for a moment, softly treading the floor as he tried to resolve the problem in his mind. Perhaps it wouldn’t be bad to reveal himself to Will? How would the man react?

It didn’t matter. He couldn’t do it. He’d resigned himself to not seeing Will in person and that meant that he was not prepared in the least to see Will Graham. Not right now. Maybe never.

“Wow, John. I’m sorry this happened.” Hannibal realised Brad was seeing Will’s injuries for the first time - his face still mottled with bruising.

Hannibal listened as they talked, eyeing the windows as he did so - it could be a viable escape route. He moved towards the window when he heard Brad mention that he needed to just finish up with Gio - “that incredible cook.” But then he had moved to the windows and couldn’t really hear the muffled responses. He did hear the outer door open and close. He went to open the window but pain shot through his shoulder and then Brad was next to him.

“Are you ok? Please promise you’ll go see your doctor as soon as you can.” Only Brad in the room, no one else. Brad must have realised he was looking because he added “I’m sorry, don’t think him rude. He just isn’t up for meeting people.. He… they beat him real bad. He got a little upset, I’m going to do a house call this afternoon instead.”

Hannibal nodded at his explanation and made for the door. “I shouldn’t keep you then.” He smiled at Brad, flooded with relief edged in sadness. “I hope it all goes well, and that your ex recovers quickly.”

3 Years 6 Months Earlier

Circumstances had allowed that Hannibal could now ask freely after Will and Brad would not think it strange. Brad had been relieved that it had indeed been a merely professional appointment, John just needed his leg worked on again and Brad had been happy to help. He wondered that they might even be able to salvage a friendship but it had been early days. As far as Hannibal could tell, once Will no longer needed further physio, he and Brad drifted apart again. Hannibal left it a long while but when he did ask Brad had just smiled politely and said they hadn’t really seen each other since the therapy had ended, and perhaps that was for the best. He wasn’t sure if he would treat John again, it had become too awkward - he suspected John was seeing someone new and felt weird about it around Brad.

Yes. Craig Whittaker.

Hannibal had hoped it would fizzle out between them but it showed no sign of doing so. The man was a weasel. Hannibal had disliked him the first time he saw him and he prided himself on being a fairly reasonable judge of character. He had questioned why Will would even be attracted to such a self important, brattish creature, but could never find the answer. Will seemed happy. But there was an edge to it - resignation, as this were an inevitable fate. It made Hannibal ache and he had to remind himself that this might not be the case. These were his opinions, his observations of them together at Will’s place, out to dinner, sometimes sailing. There was only so close Hannibal could get in any of these situations so he hoped that he was just missing something in the distance and that Will could truly be happy with this man.

2 Years 9 Months Earlier

Hannibal had observed Craig for a long while before feeling confident that Will never attended these parties with him, and that Craig was likely glad of this. The man appeared to work his way around both old and new acquaintances in an aggressively sexual way that Hannibal found distasteful and offensive on Will’s behalf.

With month upon month passing, the relationship continued to baffle Hannibal. He could see how easy Will was with the man and more over with his family. A casual familiarity that Will must treasure - it was something he didn’t come by easily, Hannibal knew. But Craig’s behaviour was abhorrent. He threw tantrums and forced Will into public arguments. He cheated. All these things Will appeared to be aware of and yet continued. They had even moved in together. That of course came with another level of resentment as it made things much harder for Hannibal and he had taken to watching Will more at his job instead.

When he had chance to see them interact he wondered if Will had decided on a life of self flagellation, putting up with such a person. He thought often about Brad and wished that might have worked out, that Will could have been happy as Brad now was with his new partner.

Hannibal hadn't been surprised how easy it had been to start getting invited to these parties. He had watched long enough to know the right people to befriend. Brought along a few dishes of finger food that ensured he was quickly accepted into the social circle. Food remained an excellent tool at his disposal - a door opener and mask in one.

This particular lavish house party in a nicely appointed condo could have been the end of it all, but instead it was the beginning. He hadn't exactly avoided Craig, but he had not instigated any interaction as yet. He waited, and after a few parties he caught an eye, and then there were occasional smiles. It would seem that at this party, Hannibal was the focus of Craig's attention - first a bright smile and then the way the man walked towards him, through the room of party-goers, with an alluring gait that he found obvious and ridiculous.

"Hi. It's Gio right? You brought those prawns, in the dip?" Even his voice was annoying, but Hannibal smiled and nodded anyway. He resisted the urge to tell the man the correct name of the dish, not wishing to alienate him with snobbery.
"I am a line cook, something of a chef in training." Hannibal smiled.

"Oh! It's all lost on me I'm afraid, I'm just happy with a burger, but those prawns are really something! My boyfriend's the foody, he likes to try out new things. He cooked snails once. Snails! Can you imagine." Hannibal found he could and felt something within him pull tight and not quite release. Between that and the flirtatious way Craig spoke despite referring to his boyfriend, Hannibal felt a surge within him he hadn't in a long time. He had a suddenly flash of memory to Abel Gideon and the cutting remarks he had made to taunt him about Will.

"Your boyfriend is here tonight?" Hannibal asked, already knowing the answer.

"No." A sly grin. "He's not really a party guy… bit antisocial really. Rude some might say. So he let's me come play on my own. Unless of course… you'd like to keep me company this evening?" Craig's hand trailed over his arm and Hannibal had a hard time not recoiling away from it.

He'd had a person suit in place for many years before he met Will Graham, and though the man saw through it completely now, he reminded himself that others did not. Craig was entranced by the charming smile he returned, whilst distaste curdled within him.
"I'd be delighted."

They'd had one drink together, made polite conversation that Craig didn't even attempt to feign interest in. Which Hannibal might have otherwise found an interesting quality if the man wasn't otherwise so insipid.
Hannibal steered the conversation to Will, asking about this accommodating boyfriend he appeared to have. Craig had sighed, a little annoyed, and snapped -

"Look, if it's a problem for you?"

"No, not at all. I'm just curious about someone who would allow such an arrangement with no fear of losing your affections." He let the words drip with charm, which clearly worked well on Craig. He waved away the thought with his hand.

“He knows he’s lucky to have me. Don’t get me wrong… John is… well he’s complicated. He’s a moody son of a bitch sometimes, and so obviously hung up on his ex that it’s almost insulting.”

Hannibal couldn’t help but take the opening - “Left him in a bad way did she?”

“She? John’s gay. His ex, well I don’t know… I hate when he even brings it up. Apparently the guy was intense, their relationship was intense. He was his therapist or something. To be honest, the guy did a number on him so it’s all half conversations and moody silences, even when I try and get him to talk about it. What I mean is, he’s no picnic and so he can take me or leave me, and so far he hasn’t left me.” Craig smiled.

Hannibal returned the smile somehow. He wasn’t sure how because it felt like his entire world had been turned upside down and given a shake. It took only moments to replay every conversation he had ever had with Brad. Even less time to realise that his own misunderstanding and assumptions had coloured everything he had thought about Will’s new life. Even less time than that to curse his idiocy. He pushed the thoughts down then. He needed time to consider fully everything he had observed in a completely wrong light. How had he been so blind?

His smile began to falter so he lifted his glass to his lips and took a long pull of drink. His mind becoming a mess of white noise everytime it tried to process the fact that he was clearly the ex that Will referred to, the one that Brad had said he hadn’t been over?
Hannibal finished his drink and sat in some sort of limbo. He wanted to go to Will. He wanted to go home and think. He wanted to go somewhere with Craig and continue what he had planned. He knew all these things should require more thought and reasoning, but when Craig suggested they move upstairs he didn’t hesitate.

Craig reassured him that David - their host - had offered him a spare room for the night, though Hannibal cared little for any explanations. Then Craig had sealed the invitation by leaning in and pressing his lips to Hannibal’s.
Hannibal let the kiss happen and continue, let Craig control it, as he tried to regain composure over his thoughts.

Will kissed these lips. The lips touched Will’s body.

He wasn’t jealous in that moment, he was curious. And he craved more. Not Craig, certainly, but more. He had never fully dealt with the lack of human contact he’d endured. He didn’t need to be a physical being, in fact there were times in his life - much of his teen years - where he did not want the touch of another. In the BSHCI the only human contact he had was to be manhandled, often roughly, by the staff. This was the first real contact he had shared since his release and these achingly long years of watching, other than the brief press of his lips to Will’s all those years ago.

When the kiss broke, Craig led Hannibal up to one of the nicely appointed bedrooms. He closed the door before pushing Hannibal onto the bed and climbing over him.

“Hmm, what can I do to get you into the mood?” Craig chuckled darkly as he wriggled in Hannibal’s uninterested lap.

Hannibal clenched his jaw, forcing a smile that wanted to be a grimace as he slid his hands up Craig until they reached his throat and gently stroked.

“Oh! A bit kinky are we?” Craig seemed delighted.

Hannibal tightened his grasp.

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

More revelations and a courtship begins.

2 Years 5 Months Earlier

Every time that Hannibal watched Will he did so knowing that he could have changed the course of all of this - if he had just squeezed. If he had been able to kill Craig.

Despite the disrespect and clear disregard Craig showed for Will, he hit that same wall - the lack of desire to kill *without* Will. At first it had been a curious feeling, though not quite repulsion. It grew into a realisation that he had no desire to kill alone anymore. And yet, he had presumed that he could kill Craig. Wasn't that why he had orchestrated their meeting? Perhaps. Not now, but sometime perhaps. Had it been that he was clutching at any way to be close to Will? The same way he befriended Brad? But Craig was no Brad.

That was the knowledge that had placed his hands around Craig's neck, that had squeezed until the smile disappeared and the man slumped forward. And as he did so Hannibal's hands had fallen away, he had shrugged himself out from under the man, now starting to come around, groggy. Hannibal had sat next to him on the bed as he regained awareness with a chuckle on his lips - clearly unaware of the danger he might have faced.

"Perhaps we're both too drunk for kinky shit." Craig rasped as he rolled onto his back and ran a finger down Hannibal's arm. "But I'm definitely sober enough for a good fuck." He laughed lightly and continued to run his fingers over Hannibal.
Hannibal took in a few shaky breaths. Did Will fuck this man? Did he make love to him? Had Craig penetrated Will? Hannibal was suddenly overwhelmed by thought and feelings and sensations. Sinking into him. Realisations. Perhaps it made sense, given their intimacy and the damage they had done to one another, that Will consider him in as a previous relationship, if one never consummated.

Hannibal hadn't let himself before consider what Will's sexual and personal relationships amounted to. He'd convinced himself of anything and everything other than the possible, painful, truth that would have made it too hard to stay away. Part of him wanted Will to have the life he had never given him, let him have the fresh start and be happy without him. He couldn't have done that, despite all the self controlled he possessed, if he had let himself believe that Brad, Craig and the myriad of lovers Will had taken were substitutes for himself.

He'd shook the thought from his head as he shook Craig's hand from his arm. It might mean nothing. Even if Will were using these men to replace him, that didn't mean Will wanted him. That Will would want him. After everything. Perhap Will merely wanted to explore

something their intimacy had opened to him. If the destructive way he had treated Brad and the self destructive way he allowed Craig to treat him indicated anything, it could be that this was Will punishing himself - and Hannibal on some level. The idea of it brought a lump to Hannibal's throat.

The only way to really know the truth was to ask Will. The thought of talking to him after so long sent a shiver through him. Such a daunting thing. It was terrifying. Knowing that Will spoke of him as though they'd had a relationship didn't make the man any more predictable. It made him more frightening and powerful.

Hannibal had convinced himself that he would been happy to continue like this, to watch over Will and stay in the shadows. It had become a distant idea, not even a wish or fantasy, that he would or could actually be in Will's life. But now he knew he had to see Will, talk to him and take it from there, even if that meant being rejected one final time. He just wasn't sure how long it would take for him to be ready for that. For him to be less broken to deal with that likelihood.

"I have to leave." Hannibal had said bluntly and walked from the room hearing the litany of curses from the man behind him.

Months now he had played that evening and it's revelations over and over in his mind. Working up the nerve but never quite knowing how to bring the circumstances about to meet Will. It was hardly as if he could go up and knock on Will's front door, was it? A chance encounter on the street was equally unsuitable. They would need somewhere private, where they could talk. Or perhaps somewhere public, to discourage any possible violent reaction. Could he see that? Could he foresee Will becoming violent towards him? He had a hard time imagining it, but he had also been thrown off a cliff by the man.

Unpredictable.

Public might be best. Public with the ability to go somewhere private or to leave.

Whether he was ready or not, the opportunity arose not long after Hannibal had resolved himself to this course. Although he and Craig avoided each other, Hannibal was still keeping himself on good terms with that wider group. He had wondered if he might be able to orchestrate running into Will at one of the parties - public enough not to cause more than a dramatic scene at most, but spaces where they could be alone to talk. That never seemed to arise - Will was never in attendance. However, he was able to glean that Will was heavily involved with a charity event that Craig's mother was hosting. It had been all too easy to make sure he was on the books of the catering company that were contracting to the event and marking himself as available as necessary.

The night came and he was nervous. He didn't remember a time in his life when he had been nervous like this. Not even the first time he had killed. Not even the first time he had kissed. And yet, the thought that at some point in this evening, he would make himself known to Will finally - it was beyond torture.

Hannibal arrived 2 hours before the event with the rest of the catering crew, immediately set to preparations in the kitchens. He wondered if Will might arrive early as well to oversee any

part of the festivities. He wondered if Craig would be there too and suddenly this seemed like a terrible idea. He needed to give Will the entire truth, but he could do that more delicately than to have that swine of a man recognise him and perhaps say something inappropriate. He busied himself in the preparations and tried to forget about it. He would not allow his mind to dwell on the matter until it was at hand.

It was an hour into the event that Mrs Whittaker, a charming woman surprisingly in consideration of her son, came into the kitchen to discuss something with Rene, the head chef. He nodded and smiled and she laughed lightly at something he said and all the while Hannibal felt the pull of barbs inside. Felt like he had swallowed razor blades. When she left he almost went after her, to get it done, ask her where Will was. Seek him out and talk. He had to do this.

He started towards the exit into the event and was stopped by the maître d'.

“Hey buddy, you can’t go out there in your whites. If you need the can it’s out the back.”

Hannibal realised there was no argument to be had without causing a scene, so just nodded and turned away. He went out the back to the lockers. He was considering whether to find a back way into the event and whether he should change back into his day clothes - which were certainly not suitable for the event. He cursed himself, he hadn’t planned this thoroughly enough. He had been lacking in his planning, not even considered these things though they were obvious. He was a fool and a remnant of the monster he had once been. But what had the alternative been? He looked in the mirror in his locker door - his grey hair pulled back into a small knot; his beard in need of trimming. Even dressed in the finest of his Baltimore suits he would look a mess, he would look a clown.

He would look as broken as he had become without Will.

He needed to push past this, he realised. This wasn’t important, it was superficial. Will was not superficial - the important thing was for them to talk. But, Brad and Craig were young and handsome. What was Hannibal compared to them? How many years were written on his face? More than those that he had been parted from Will. He spent little time on his appearance now, and it showed, he realised. He was just an old man.

“John, please don’t…” A voice sounded from the next corridor - the door to the other end of the lockers that lead away from the kitchen. It sounded like Mrs Whittaker, though younger and lighter. Her daughter perhaps?

“Don’t Susan, just don’t start!” Will’s voice jarred him and he gripped hold of the locker door, almost using it as a barrier between him and the voice beyond the outer doors. So close. So close.

“He’s a fuck up, but he loves you.”

A mirthless laugh from Will. “Susan, right now your brother is at a party looking to get fucked by some random guy rather than here with his family.”

“You don’t know that. Maybe he was just-”

“Of course I know that. Of course I know. Why do you all keep making excuses for him?”

“If it’s that bad John why do you stay?”

A silence then and Hannibal froze.

“I don’t fucking know.”

Then another door opened and closed, the voices stopped. Hannibal realised he’d been holding his breath. His pulse was racing. This wasn’t the time, this wasn’t the place. How could he have been so stupid?

He wasn’t sure there would ever be a right time and place if Craig was still in the picture.

1 Year 11 Months Earlier

How easily Hannibal had fallen back into the pattern of observing Will’s life.

It wasn’t that he had decided never to talk with Will, but that he had reached an understanding of how much more delicate this was than he first thought. He could not rush into it. In truth he knew there was a great deal of procrastination to some of this. There had been a number of times he might have talked with Will - each more suitable than his aborted effort at the charity dinner. And yet he did not.

Perhaps could not? He allowed himself the shadow of that thought once in awhile.

He settled back into his routine - as unsatisfying as it was compared to life before Craig. Before Craig, Will had lived in an area easy to watch over. He had driven a more secluded way to his work at the boatyard. He had maintained a relatively quiet existence and when he did go out Hannibal had found it easy to trail him. Hannibal was at least glad of the fact that Will had kept his own home when he and Craig had moved in together. It made sense - Will wouldn’t want to be beholden to anyone, and would want the option of his own space when suburbia became too overwhelming. On occasion he had followed Will when he had come to air out the house and let Winston run in the woods. There had also been the occasional nights and few weekends that Will had stayed - perhaps after fighting with Craig.

His mind had been on the charity event attempt when he’d decided to watch Will for a while. He’d been surprised when he didn’t see Will’s car on his drive-by the house, finding it instead when he went out to the boatyard. It was unusual for Will to work this late, unless they had a deadline on a client’s vessel, and though he couldn’t be sure Hannibal didn’t think that was the case. He parked a street over - his usual spot at this location. Not wanting to get too close to the boatyard itself in case he was spotted. He looked at himself in the rearview mirror and scoffed at the idea. Would Will even recognise him now? The old man he had become? The idea of whether or not Will might find him attractive wasn’t something he considered, he told himself. But truly it was there. Will had been seeking the companionship of young, attractive men, and Hannibal was neither. He pushed the thought down. It didn’t matter, wasn’t relevant. When they finally spoke everything would be resolved and then Hannibal could leave, he would take the inevitable rejection and leave Will to his life.

He was surprised when Will's car finally left the yard and passed him in a stuttering manner. From the state of the driving, Hannibal assumed Will might be a little intoxicated. Though he knew it was a reckless, he followed Will the entire way home to ensure he arrived safely. He watched as Will pulled up to his house and sat. A cold sweat broke out over his skin as he wondered whether Will had seen him, but after a few minutes or considering whether he should maintain a visual on Will or drive off, Will did something unexpected. He pulled his car back out of the driveway and continued.

Hannibal followed as discreetly as he could, which was difficult with the roads so quiet at this time. But Will hadn't seemed to notice and after a while Hannibal realised the direction Will had taken was towards his old house. Hannibal pulled off at a different exit and made his own way there, around the back to the woods. Once he parked up he moved quickly but quietly through the undergrowth until he reached his usual vantage point - now a little overgrown from lack of use - just as Will was pulling up.

He sat in the car again for a long while. And then, finally opened the door. The automatic light from within shone on his face and Hannibal's breath hitched. There was the tiniest darkness near his hairline that Hannibal wanted to see as blood. But it was the look on Will's face that had arrested him. Euphoria of a sort and determination. Something alive inside Will that he hadn't seen since they had been parted. Even his eyes seemed brighter and when he finally left the car he moved with purpose. Hannibal was curious now, too curious. Reckless, but it felt within him like there had been a shift. Some sort of change or realisation, like that which he had witnessed come over Will the day he had shot Garrett Hobbs. The day he got a glimpse of what Will truly was.

When the front door closed behind Will, Hannibal stole forward and concealed himself in the darkness beneath the kitchen window. He could hear Will moving inside, loudly opening cupboards, items being clunked onto the table. He tried to look a couple of times but had to duck back down as Will moved to and fro around the house, collecting more items to the table. When the sound of movement stopped Hannibal did chance a look and saw Will was sitting with his back to the window at the kitchen table. The tables held an array of items - a couple of hunting knives, some twine, rolls of tape, adhesive, an array of what seemed almost like craft products. It was all so surreally familiar - in a distant dream Hannibal had seen items like this placed together.

He watched intently, not just Will but the table - as though the items would draw themselves together and give him an answer. The answer did finally come, as Will shifted and he could see over his shoulder that he was reading papers from a box placed directly in front of him. They appeared to be xeroxed copies of case files. Chesapeake Ripper files, his files, his murders. He clenched and unclenched his fists as he tried to understand what Will was doing. And then the items on the table came together in his mind. Not all at once, but bit by bit as he remembered the tableaus he had made - the supplies he had required to render them, items no doubt listed in the case files.

"What are you doing Will?" Hannibal muttered under his breath, a chilled thrill running over his skin.

1 Year 6 Months Earlier

Hannibal read the headline and was somewhere between proudly amused and fearful.

~Second Ripper-Style Killing Shakes West Coast~

Will hadn't immediately killed. Not including the belligerent wife-beater that was reported in the news the day after Will's unexpected drive to his old house. The man that, Hannibal supposed, should be thanked for this catalyst. There was something fulfilling and even arousing about Will killing someone. It ignited in him something he thought he had lost and didn't realise he had missed. He felt like he was returning to himself, his shadow life was perhaps coming to an end.

~Local authorities say that the style of the killings reflects that of the Chesapeake Ripper killings that ended in 2013 with the presumed death of the the cannibal doctor, Hannibal Lecter.~

Including the wife beater, this was Will's third kill in California, the second two having been made in the style of his own murder tableaus. Something that made him both ache and burn. His own murders had first started as revenge, and he realised that in part - no matter how he reasoned it - they had continued because of power. He had the power to kill and consume and he chose to do it because his sense of morality was perhaps different to that commonly held. He had always shied away from psychoanalyzing himself too deeply, but could at least attest that this might produce a similar result in anyone who had witnessed the death of their family and been fed their beloved sister.

It did not do to dwell on such things. What mattered was that in Will, those long years ago, he had seen something of himself. Perhaps not the trauma, but the beast within him that could understand him, and at one time had fantasized might even love him. He had not been lonely before he met Will Graham and yet it had been an almost immediate realisation on their introduction that his life would be bereft without him.

Will's current course was not something he could have predicted.

He was scared that Will might be caught, though if anyone knew full well of both murder and those who investigated it, it was Will. Covering his tracks would be simple.

He had begun letting himself into Will's old house whenever he could in order to see what Will was up to, as it had become somewhat of a base of operations. A cheap laptop had appeared and scrolling the history Hannibal had discovered that Will was seeking targets. Criminals not brought to justice on technicalities. Hannibal had chuckled - Will as an avenging angel was something of a warming image. If he had not known this information - matched the names he had memorised from Will's laptop to the victims in the news - he might still have known. No, he would still have known.

~The bodies were mutilated and displayed in such a way that resembled the infamous Ripper Murders. We have been in touch with the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, where the Chesapeake Ripper was once held, and believe this to be a copycat killing. We are hopeful for insights they might give to help us catch this copy cat before they commit another murder. They are yet to comment.~

When Will had once displayed the body of a beast who had been Randall Tier, it had been done in such a way as to convey a message. A message that Hannibal had later learned to be false, but that seemed so distant a betrayal now. It had been for him though, it had been a courtship.

Hannibal glanced again at the censored images on the page, easily able to recreate them in his mind from memory. He'd had the good fortune to follow Will on this excursion and had waited and seen the message complete. Stood before it and admired the beauty in it.

He wanted to believe that Will was trying to draw him out. To draw Hannibal to him. But his thoughts regarding Will didn't always add up anymore. Sometimes they conflicted with information he had to remind himself was not true - the ex Will had trouble forgetting was not that woman; Will had tried to kill them both; Will had moved on, hadn't he? No, he was waiting, wasn't he? Hannibal knew the resolution was so simple, to talk to Will would be so simple. But the longer he put it off the harder it became again.
His reflection taunted him each time he looked in the mirror and saw an old man. His memory sprang traps and betrayal on him. Wrenching him with thoughts of being pulled from the bluff as vivid as those of Will uttering "it's beautiful" so enchantingly close to his lips.

He had seen things in Will before that had been false. He had thought before that he had known the man. Caution gripped him. There needed to be more. He needed something more from Will, even if courtship was written in beautifully mutilated corpses.

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

You're escalating, Will.
It was Hannibal's voice in his head.

We begin to come full circle.

1 Year 2 Months Earlier

With my hands…

Will woke in a cold sweat. It had been a long time since he'd had a nightmare. He sat up in the bed and looked at Craig, still sleeping, breathing steadily. A big enough bed that he didn't disturb his boyfriend, and he was glad of it. He didn't want to deal with the man's histrionics. Instead he pushed himself from the bed and went to the bathroom. He splashed water on his face before sitting on the lidded toilet and placing his head in his hands.

Hannibal.

He had dreamt that he had killed Hannibal.

This particular nightmare had happened from time to time. When he had first come to in the hospital - dreams and nightmares that might have been memories and he was never sure which they truly were. Until the sighting Starling had informed him of, the one that had resulted in his current situation, he had believed some of the worst of the dreams. They seemed so real - watching Hannibal taken by the sea, unable to reach for him, unable to apologise for tearing them apart.

He pushed the thoughts down and stood, splashed more water on his face. How many years before he was truly able to deal with what had happened? To resolve his own guilt about this situation he had created?

...As long as it took, as many years as it took, to find Hannibal.

He tried to picture the man - he would look older now, would he have let his hair go grey? Would he have grown it out or kept it as short, maybe shorter, that at the BSHCI? Was he living somewhere warm in South America, dressed in white and beige? Distinguished, Will imagined. He would still cook of course, maybe not anything as high profile and noticeable as the high society affairs he'd had in Baltimore. Will sort of enjoyed the idea of him owning his own little bistro or something.

He smiled at the thought for a moment, before his heart sank and his face fell. He could imagine Hannibal starting over, happy without him. A new life. The thought made Will ache. Happiness and sadness conflicting within him. Not for the first time he was struck by how selfish his actions were. If Hannibal had moved on and saw the tableaus, as was intended, would he ignore them? Would he be upset by Will trying to ruin his perfectly settled new life? Would he think Will was trying to set him up?

There were a million reasons why Hannibal might stay away, each as upsetting to Will as the last.

He told himself this next one would be the final one. This next kill and then no more.

He knew it had made the international headlines now, if it didn't draw Hannibal to him, he would stop.

...He tried to ignore the fact that he had made a similar promise to himself with the last one.

It was all prepared. Perhaps that was what had prompted the dream. He was all set for tomorrow night. He'd quickly discovered a newfound appreciation for the efforts Hannibal had had to go to for his creations. The planning and preparation, the materials. Tomorrow he would create another piece of art from death - beauty from the ugliness of that person in life. He would write a love letter with flesh and bones.

Closer together, more desperate in some ways - but if that was what it took...

You're escalating, Will.

It was Hannibal's voice in his head.

8 Months Earlier

He knew it was reckless. Closer together in both time and distance. He should travel further out of state. It had taken a few hours to drive here but that, he knew from vast experience, wasn't nearly far enough to be safe from suspicion. Further meant harder to plan, more research needed, more time. Will rubbed his hand roughly over his face, only feeling the wet there once it had smudged. The blood sticky on his palm. And this place had been perfect, hadn't it?

But… he had all the time in the world, didn't he? It had been years already to this point, maybe he should have left more time between the kills? He could wait longer couldn't he?

So many years, already. Hannibal might have done anything, been anywhere, in the time since he had been sighted. He might even have died. Something horrifically mundane like a car crash. Obscuring his features in a fire and leaving him to be buried as a John Doe. The thought shook Will to his core. The idea that Hannibal could disappear leaving no trace.

...But he had left his mark, in his crimes which more and more Will could understand the beauty in. He had left his mark in Will. On Will. Will *was* his mark in some ways. As long as

he lived Hannibal had agency in the world and that was at least a strangely comforting thought.

An owl hooted and brought Will's attention back to the scene of the crime. So long he had used his imagination to recreate and solve, but now he used it to create and lure. He looked over the remains of Clark West. A man with enough well placed friends to have shrugged off several sexual assault accusations in college. Ten years on and the same friends were still helping him tear down any woman who dared speak up. Will considered this a fitting display.

He had hollowed the man's chest, his heart now on ice in the back of the pickup. Inside the cavity he had placed roses. He knew, hoped, the sentiment there would be obvious. The first tableaus had been a little more subtle - a mix of elements from different Ripper killings - the message nothing more than 'I am here, where are you?'

This one was closer to home in more ways than one. Now that he knew the killings had been picked up by the international press, he had to dare. Wherever Hannibal was he would hopefully see this and try to reach him in some way. Perhaps a killing of his own to give away his location, that might be safest? Will felt a thrill at the idea.

Safest wasn't exactly the word he would use for this kill - it was so obvious, so childishly simple, as to hopefully leave Hannibal in no doubt as to the message and who sent it.

Will left the man with blood red roses where his heart should be, displayed almost sacrificially in the San Bernardino National Forest. Just obscured enough that it wouldn't take long for someone staying at the Dogwood campground to find and report it.
The campground was less than two hours drive from his home in Pasadena, but he didn't go back that night. Too risky. Instead he washed with bottled water at the side of the pick-up and then drove down to the motel room he'd rented in San Bernardino. He'd told Craig he was heading over to the coast, had a job on an ocean-going vessel for a few days - helping out with routine maintenance whilst it was docked. This was actually true, just not the exact dates - he'd told Craig he'd be gone for five days, he didn't tell him that the job was only for three. It had all come together so easily that it had to be fate.

He slept well. Maybe the comfort of having rid the world of a cruel rapist. Maybe it was the lack of Craig or the thought of perhaps being one step closer to Hannibal, he wasn't sure. One thing he was sure of was that things had hit rock bottom in his relationship. He felt completely detached from Craig now. It had always been a convenience in some ways - a warm body. Someone who treated him perhaps how he felt he should be treated. Until that night after drinking at the boatyard.

Killing again had revived something within him. He felt closer to Hannibal again, and for the first time in years, could see them being reunited as a real possibility. The more he considered this, the more he saw the things Craig was doing to him - that he was letting him do to him. He wasn't going to let it continue forever, but right now Craig remained, at the least, convenient. Useful for an alibi if nothing else. Will had to consider all these things and wait out his current life. The life he realised he'd only been half living - like a shadow.

He had been considering this as he checked out of the motel not long after dawn. How very complicated things had to be before they could be simple. Because it would be simple once

Hannibal found him. They'd had years to argue with each other in their minds. To shout recriminations and finally reach forgiveness for things that happened so long ago they might as well have happened to different people. Perhaps they could skip all that and just find the raw truth between them that he had been too afraid to embrace before the Dragon?

As he pulled the car out of the motel parking lot and turned the next corner his heart stopped. For a moment he thought he saw a face. He almost swerved as he tried to look back to see the man, but he'd disappeared into a side street. Thankful for the quiet streets, Will threw the car into reverse and only braked once he hit the side street and looked down it. It was empty, no one there at all. He shook his head and continued to drive.

The hair had been longer, grey. Clothes casual. But the face. The face etched in his mind, the face he'd know anywhere. He shook the thought away as he continued to drive - all these thoughts about Hannibal had him seeing things.

2 Months Earlier

"Mr Grey, would you come with us please? We have a few questions we need to ask you."

Will had remained calm when he found the two police officers on his doorstep, but quickly the hairs on the back of his neck were standing on end. A cool shiver.

Before he had chance to reply, Craig bustled forward in the hallway. "What's this about?" His usual snotty indignation - so predictable that Will had to stop from rolling his eyes.

"We just need Mr Grey to come and give a statement regarding a criminal report. I'm afraid we can't give further details."

"What report? John?" Craig sounded put out but Will just shrugged and grabbed his coat. Whatever was going on, he would meet it head on with the police, but Craig be damned.

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The trip in the back of the police car had been weird. How many times before California had he put someone in those seats? His mind went to the memory of seeing Hannibal being placed into the back of a car outside his Wolf Trap home. A whole lifetime ago now.

When they arrived he was given no further details, but lead into an interrogation room and left there for quite sometime before the door opened again.

"Mr Grey, a pleasure to see you again." Agent Starling smiled at him as she entered the room, offering her hand which he shook whilst he smiled.

"Hi. I didn't think we'd ever meet again. It was a while back now, but I never got to say - thanks so much for sorting everything out with Winston." Will's tone spoke of his absolute sincerity.

"My pleasure, sir." There was a slight quiver to her voice as she released his hand and indicated the chairs. Will took a seat opposite her and waited for her to open the file she held.

She steepled her hands over it and looked at him instead, studying him for a moment. “I’m guessing you don’t need me to tell you why I’m here?”

Will smiled. “I read the papers. I did wonder if you might check in. In fact I was starting to wonder what was taking you so long. I nearly reached out myself, one more and I would have done.” He affected nervousness, as though he might have been concerned he could be a victim himself.

Starling nodded. “I requested clearance to come see you after they found a body in San Bernardino National Forest. But as you can imagine there is a lot of red tape involved in getting to people in witness protection. Since then there have been three more killings we believe to be linked, similar in motif but further afield. All west coast, but the San Bernardino victim was in your close proximity.” Her gaze didn’t waver, she was watching him intently and he found himself managing every single microexpression.

Did she suspect him or was this a warning that he might be at risk in some way? He needed to gauge it right and give nothing away.

“You think Hannibal is looking for me?” He forced the words with a nervous smile which she returned warmly as he wrung his hands.

“No, I don’t think so. These tableaus lack the Ripper’s finesse. We’ve already confirmed that this is a copycat. One with their own flair - copycat would be the wrong term here really. Perhaps an admirer. These are not exact, nor do they seem to be trying to be. The fact that they have so far all been along the west coast concerns me.”

“How so?” Will asked. “I mean… If I’m honest it’s been unnerving me a little. Is it something to do with me? Or just a coincidence?” He levelled his tone and expression into what felt like the correct amount of concern.

“Well, this exactly. At the moment the locals are working on it being a coincidence, mostly because they don’t want to have to deal with it being more. But I’ve got people looking into your relocation - checking out all the staff involved. If someone leaked your whereabouts we will find out.” Starling was clear and firm and Will gave a nod of thanks. “I just wanted you to know we are taking the potential connection to you seriously. We will bring you in for full protection if need be.”

“Thanks, I appreciate that. But, what are your thoughts on it? Should I be worried? Should I be packing a bag?” Will frowned and tried to press a nervous smile through it.

She shook her head. “Try and remain calm for now. My personal theory is that there is a chance this is someone fixated on you or Doctor Lecter and has knowledge of your whereabouts.”

“Someone who has been reading too much Tattle Crime I imagine.” Will huffed a laugh and Starling smiled - she seemed grateful for the slight break into levity.

“There are those who have perpetuated the idea of you being more involved with Doctor Lecter and his crimes than suspected.”

“Ah yes, the Murder Husbands thing. Good old Freddie. I think if you ask Jack Crawford he will be very clear about the orders I was under - whether they were above board or not. I was just being the fisherman he wanted me to be.” Will sighed and spread his hands before him, trying for a convincing exasperation at the whole situation.

“It is quite possible that this killer has romanticized your relationship with Doctor Lecter and has become fixated on the pair of you, or your role in his life. My worst case scenario at this point is that the killer is fixated on Doctor Lecter and wants to draw you out in order to draw him - replace you in the relationship that they perceive.” Her expression softened after a moment and she smiled again. “But please, we are working very hard on this. We will keep you safe and hopefully avoid upheaving your life again in the process.”

“I really appreciate that Agent Starling. I’m glad to know you’re working on it.”

“I’m heading back to Quantico in the morning, but I have left instructions regarding this situation. Officer Dave Green has as much need to know information as I was happy to give. You feel unsafe, see anything suspicious - anything at all - you get in touch with him and he will bring you in immediately and call me.”

“Thank you.” Will smiled and watched as she started to stand. “Can I… can I ask - how’s Jack.”

She sat back down and her smile became a little sad. “He’s doing better than he was last you saw him. He got put out the pasture but was given a good package. Drinks a little too much. Could use more friends.”

Will nodded. “He was never the same after Bella… But… I’m… I wish I could… Could you tell him I’m thinking of him? Are you allowed to do that?”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thanks.” Another nod. That life seemed so far away as to be surreal. He wasn’t going to ask about anyone else. He couldn’t. He didn’t want to know what he had left behind and how much blame for any ruination lay at his feet. He knew from the papers that the Verger-Bloom’s had shut down the Verger legacy pig farming, seemed to do a lot for charity now. Molly… he couldn’t ask. Starling seemed to realise this as she sat expectantly waiting for more queries before finally getting up to leave. He was grateful she didn’t offer up any information he hadn’t asked for. This day - collision of past and present - was already surreal enough.

Present

John Grey was pretty sure he could be happy, settled, content, with Craig Whittaker.
Will Graham wasn’t so sure.

Will squelched the wet newspaper between his fingers as he watched Craig head back into the house. He felt sick to his stomach at the pretence. An unspoken thing really, the way they acted now in public - like everything was better than fine. The reality was almost unbearable.

The man was a disrespectful child who constantly wanted to be indulged. And Will… Will was biding his time. Soon, he was sure, his life would change for the better and Craig would no longer be in it. Almost two years since he had started killing, started trying to lure Hannibal to him. He had to believe, had to have faith that it would eventually work. He had to have that or he had nothing.

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

The end.

The beginning.

This was it.

8 Months Earlier

Hannibal began watching Will even more closely.

He was torn. Constantly worried that Will might get caught and they would never find a way to be reunited - but equally worried about any such reunion.

At the least, he was sure now, Will was trying to reach out to him. And whilst that was reassuring it was no less nerve wracking.

It had become ever more difficult to ignore - the more Will killed and the more he studied the tableau's he left, Will's intention was clear if not his motivation. That was why he had followed on this occasion - had watched. At first he thought Will was reckless for staging this so close to home. But then the meaning of it all dawned on him and he wondered how many months Will had mulled over this tableau. Weighed the dangers of the proximity against the obviousness in it. The simplicity that was sure to be understood.

He had wanted to reveal himself as he watched Will cut out the heart so expertly, arrange the flowers so beautifully. In the dogwood. Hannibal smiled at how terribly simple it was. Almost insultingly so - no hidden meaning. And he knew it for what it was. It was desperation. It was Will being as blatant as he could and not caring about giving himself away. Will was desperate to draw him out, that much was clear. To risk something so blatant – to leave a romantic bouquet in place of a heart, in the dogwood. Even the name brought forth images of Will in Wolf Trap, walking with his dogs, heading his pack.

Hannibal's heart raced, blood thudding in his ears. Only Will could make that happen, and now it raced at the thought of this message. He wondered if Will would keep the heart so they could enjoy it together. The romance in the gesture of that and of the roses was so entirely beautiful to him. This was Will declaring himself, he could have no doubt.

Hannibal watched Will step back to admire his handiwork, taking a moment to rearrange the flowers very slightly, before starting back to his pick-up.

Hannibal had considered stepping out then - of going after the man - but there had been a rustle in the treeline along from him. His mind raced to the possibility of Will being seen and caught despite the seclusion Hannibal had only found by tracking the man.

Hannibal had moved quickly and quietly, eyes focused on the area he was certain he had heard something. He considered nothing in that moment other than keeping Will safe and free. He would do anything to achieve that.

A step further and the rustling happened again. This time two raccoons dashed from treeline, chattering at the sight of him and disappearing into the night. Hannibal watched after them until he could no longer see them.

When he turned back Will was gone.

It was well past dawn by the time Hannibal left the woods. He had waited until the sun had come up over the tableau to admire it in all its splendor.

Even so, it was still early morning when he returned to San Bernardino. He wondered if Will had already checked out of his motel, and dared steal near to it. The desire to reveal himself had once more waned, but he longed to see him again - see that look in his eyes after last night. Something akin to that he had seen the night on the bluff. If he was to reunite with Will it would be planned and meticulous - like Will's murders - but if he remained a safe distance he might be able to at least see if Will had already left.
He was only a block away when he spotted Will's vehicle. With little time to react he ducked into a side street and into an almost hidden doorway. His heart was racing again, he was sure Will had seen him and then that was confirmed when he heard the car stop and reverse.

Too close. Again, too close. Not ready yet.

This had to stop now. This was a situation wholly of his own making, shaped by his insecurities and assumptions. He could no longer go on like this, Will had made clear his want, Hannibal had to do the same. It was time to start being ready.

One Month Earlier

Hannibal stepped out of the shower and grabbed a towel, wrapping it around his waist before wiping condensation from the mirror to reveal his reflection.

He scrubbed at his freshly shaven jaw - the skin pale there. The closest shave he'd had in a long time. No stubble at all, for now - but he knew when it came through it would be grey.

His hair was short and neat, as it had been the last time he and Will had seen each other. He worried that having it cut back from his face like this would age him but if anything he looked more youthful for it. As youthful as someone his age could get. So many years it had been....

Melancholy settled within him.

In truth he had aged well, despite the near Mediterranean tan he had developed under the Californian sun. His skin looked healthy, and his eyes bright. But a smile was hard to manage. He wasn't the same man he had been, and he knew, neither was Will.

They had been together once - conjoined.

Maybe they might not be now despite everything, but he had to know.

Hannibal finished drying himself and threw the towel in the hamper before switching on his laptop. It was time to set a plan in motion.

He looked a local boat hire site, almost amused at the fact that Will's knowledge would be of use to him here.

The Present

Hannibal considered impulses.

He had acted on impulse many times in his past – often when Will was involved. He rubbed a hand over his forehead at the thought of the scar he had left Will in the same place.

He was no longer that man. That child really. Until he met Will Graham he had not thought much on emotions, much less that his own. They seemed to have ceased to develop fully since Mischa. He could recognise now the behaviour of a spoilt and petulant child in his actions. He could recognise some of the behaviours, though not as magnified, in Craig Whittaker. Had that been part of the attraction on some level? In all other ways the man's personality was so unlike Hannibal's own – or at least the one he had cultivated and shown to the public. But he could argue, hesitantly admit, that he and Craig shared the emotional level of a child.

Or at least they had. Any concerns he had about reacting the same way as he had in the past with Will were quashed by his current outlook. Tempered by years of not having Will, of learning the patience and emotional maturity it took to not only maintain that distance but to also close that distance once more.

He considered these things as he sat watching the house.

It was at least twenty minutes after Will had returned to the house after collecting his paper that he came out once more, jogging shoes on and Winston in tow. Whittaker looked on from the kitchen window, a slight scowl there. It made Hannibal sneer.

The look goes unnoticed by Will. Unseeing or uncaring?

Had he broken Will Graham? Hannibal wondered again. This was a new man – this John Grey? A man able to live blindly with this lover, so it seemed on the surface. But Hannibal knew the truth of it from the tableaus he had been gifted.

Was this what Will wanted? What he had needed all along? He was starting to think the answer was yes, but not with Whittaker. No – he was luring Hannibal in like a good fisherman and Hannibal no longer planned on resisting the temptation. He was ready.

As Will turned the corner of the block, Hannibal looked back to the house. He was done watching, done being an observer and not a participant in Will's life.

He took a quick look in the mirror, presentable, and stepped out of the car. He walked purposely to the house, up the steps, knocking on the door firmly. Resolved. This was it.

The end.

The beginning.

This was it.

Craig Whittaker answered the door, his expression something between confused and annoyed. He finally placed where he knew Hannibal from and it settled on what could only be described as bitchy when he folded his arms across his chest and sneered – "what the hell do you want?"

Maybe John Grey was pretty sure he could be happy, settled, content, with Craig Whittaker. But he knew Will Graham wasn't so sure. Neither was Hannibal Lecter.

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Hannibal purposely didn't spend too much time in the house. Not just to leave as little evidence as possible, but because he didn't need to see how they lived. He couldn't risk letting his jealousy get the better of him regardless of how much more control he had over himself these days. He had planned this meticulously for weeks, waited until the perfect opportunity. He had taken all the precautions he ever had and he was not going to risk all that hard work when his reunion with Will was so close.

"Hi, I'm…I'm sorry to bother you like this. It's just… can we talk privately?"

Craig frowned at him, the scowl returning. "What the fuck do we have to talk about? Aren't you the guy from Sasha's party?"

Hannibal made an affectation of bashfulness. "You remember me?" he breathed out the words, aiming for something like flattered relief.

Will was too unpredictable for him to be counted on at a time when Hannibal might be able to take Craig unconscious. The neighbourhood and lack of vehicle access to their backyard also precluded it. And so, this had been his plan – flattery and lies. A lure of his own. Will might be proud that he had learned how to fish.

"I… Sasha gave me your address. I know that was a couple of years ago now, but I had wanted to get in touch. God I'm such an idiot." He shook his head and made to leave the porch, an affectation of the person he was sure would appeal to Whittaker.

"No, wait, it's cool. What was it you wanted to talk about?" Craig looked furtively along the road and Hannibal knew he was checking for Will's return.

“I feel like such an ass. Sasha wants to throw a surprise party for Derek and I offered to cater. Maybe you remember - I cook?”

Craig nodded and smiled, and Hannibal knew the response would have been the same whether he remembered or not. He was thankful at least to have confirmed the name of Sasha’s new boyfriend and that this so far had set off no warning bells to Craig.

“He said we could do with someone’s help with the planning and suggested you - you know all of their friends. He gave me your details to get in touch and see if we could get our heads together. I’m such an ass for turning up here. He gave me your number, I should have called…I just…” Hannibal looked up from beneath lowered lashes. “I hoped you would remember me and I didn’t think you would over the phone.”

“Of course.” Craig grinned. How much easier he made this for believing that he was so completely irresistible. “I remember you running out on me when things were just about to get kinky.” Craig chuckled and licked his lips.

“Could I maybe come in and chat over some ideas with you? Make an invitation list for Sasha to confirm and get some idea of the catering requirements?” He went for coy again and the responding smile let him know he was reeling Craig in. “Unless of course… I don’t want to intrude on you and your partner.”

“Actually, can we go get brunch? My treat if you like?” Craig was already picking up his keys from a side table near the door before Hannibal even had chance to agree. He wanted to smirk but didn’t - so predictable.

“Yes, that sounds great. I drove, she I drive us? I can drop you back later?”

Craig agreed and pulled out his phone on the way to the car, punching in a short text before jumping in next to Hannibal, grin still wide.

“Where shall we go?” Hannibal asked, though the answer would be of no importance.

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

In the strangest of ways, the teacup comes back together.

The Present

-Had to go out, back later.

Craig had sent that text a day ago. Will hadn't started to worry until mid afternoon - Craig often went off for brunch without a word to him. But by the evening he was just pissed off. Because it was just like Craig to go off and not come back - end up at this part or that party and come back stinking of booze and fuck knows who.

When he hadn't returned by mid morning and wasn't returning his messages, Will started to think something could actually be wrong.

-You seen Craig? He didn't come home last night.

Will pressed send on the text to Craig's sister, Susan.

-Haven't talked to him all week. Did you guys have a fight?

-Who knows? I'm sure if you asked him I probably did something awful. I'll check around and let you know when I find him.

Who I find him with. Will's brain helpfully supplied.

But he realised he didn't care. He hadn't cared in a long while. Not just about Craig sleeping around, or even Craig in general, but the whole life. The whole pretence he had built. It was nothing because it wasn't with Hannibal.

He had planned to leave. Hadn't he? He always had he was sure. This was always a facade and yet he had fallen into the comfort of it, whilst he waited for Hannibal. He had become comfortable with the ease of it. It was easier to be there and treated like shit, maintain his appearance of a life. Live as a shadow, waiting to be fleshed out once more.

But he had decided his waiting was over. He wasn't going to do this anymore. Craig not coming home this one time too many was just what he needed to force his hand. How could he keep living as a shadow if there was no end to it? One day he would disappear altogether. Fade to nothing.

“Two years. Two years Hannibal.” He muttered as he sat on the bed he shared with Craig - the mundanity of it as he considered two years worth of flesh, blood and bone he had shaped from the ugly dead to lure Hannibal back to him.

I’m a good fisherman…

“Why didn’t you find me?”

He couldn’t let himself believe Hannibal was dead, but surely, he would have come for him. He would have seen the tableaus and known?

Will shook his head. This was it. It was over. There had to be a line.

He stood and grabbed a bag down from the top of the wardrobe and started to pack up. So few things here were really *his*. Yes, some were John’s, but not Will’s. He packed clothes, the few keepsakes he had from his previous life - a little dog statue, a photo of his whole pack just after Winston had joined them, a lure he had made…

Made for Abigail.

He had wanted to teach her how to fish.

He clenched his jaw. He had given up everything for Hannibal, and Hannibal had taken so much more than that on top. And now he had nothing.

And yet… he still couldn’t hate the man.

Forgiveness was beyond them, but he understood Hannibal. He might not have reacted the same way and done the same things, killed the same people - he swallowed a lump that rose in his throat. But he understood why Hannibal had. Because he could see him as clearly as he had always been able to see Will in return. The Will that now killed those not deserving of a better fate and making beauty out of their deaths as his would-be mentor would have wanted.

His mind went to the beautiful tableau he had left at the Lecter Estate a lifetime ago. A world away from the Californian sunshine.

Maybe he should look there. Maybe he would find Hannibal or perhaps Chiyoh. A link, a connection and a way forward. Retrace his steps.

No.

He shook his head and shoved the last of his things haphazardly into the bag before starting down the stairs.

He couldn’t do this anymore. Nearly 6 years apart, lures cast and left empty. Dead or alive, he didn’t know, he only knew Hannibal wasn’t coming for him.

Will dropped his bag by the front door and went into the kitchen, grabbing an empty crate from the cupboard and packing up tinned food for himself, wet and dry food for Winston, a few of Winston’s toys.

He whistled and smiled when he heard the clattering of paws on hardwood as Winston raced to the kitchen. Will laughed at the expectant look, petted his head and fed him a treat.

“Just you and me now buddy.”

He considered leaving a note for Craig, but he had nothing to say.

He carried everything out to the car, Winston at his heels. When he locked the door he removed the key from his chain and dropped it in the letter box.

*

Hannibal watched the man’s eyes flutter open just as a particularly large wave caught them and swayed the boat.

The effects were muffled down in the belly of the small but nicely kept boat - the hull taking the brunt and rocking them gently. A tarp laid on the floor under the chair in which Craig sat - protecting the expensive linoleium of the kitchen.

It hadn’t been *terribly* expensive, not even a dent in the secreted wealth he had been hoarding these many years. Two nice sized cabins, a well appointed living space with modern kitchen fixtures. It was by no means a luxury yacht, but certainly not to be scoffed at. The slightly dated decor made it strangely rustic and homely, and none of the modern updates clashed.

Will would like it. He hoped.

Hannibal couldn’t deny that had been his first consideration in the buying of this particular vessel. Not too grand for the modest man, big enough room for two grown men and a dog. Modern enough and well presented enough to suit both their tastes.

Hannibal’s thoughts were drawn back to Craig by his strangled groan. The man looked slightly sick and it seemed fitting that he didn’t not seem as at home on the waves as Will probably would have liked. Though, Hannibal mused, it could be the fact that he was bound and gagged and tied to a chair.

Hannibal dropped to a crouch in front of him, enjoying the fear in the man’s eyes.

“Oh Craig. This is surely a lesson? You should be more discerning. Perhaps you should be more careful who you try to pursue, especially with a doting partner at home?”

Craig whined and pulled against the ropes that held his arms behind the chair. The man had gone willingly with Hannibal - first towards a suggested restaurant. But before they were over halfway there, Hannibal - with hushed tones and coy eyes - had invited Craig to talk at his place instead. His new home - his little boat.

Oh the roll of waves can be so very enjoyable. Hannibal had near managed a blush as he said it, and Craig’s salacious grin in response told him the bait had been taken.

He had barely managed to keep pawing hands from him as he maneuvered them down below decks. It had taken a moment of looking around at the kitchen - set up as a very neat, if

obvious, torture chamber - that Craig had panicked. But it had been too late by then - Hannibal had already moved behind him with the chloroform he had prepared.

Hannibal stood and moved to the counter, spreading out the roll of blades. Running a finger over the sharpest.

“You must understand Craig. John is very dear to me and you have treated him very badly. You have been very rude, and I cannot abide the rude.”

Craig’s eyes were wide with fear and silent tears rolled down his cheeks.

Hannibal took in a deep breath and enjoyed the scent of fear rising from the man.

This side of himself had been denied, the beast within starved because of the loss of his partner. He thought he could not kill without Will, but he knew for sure now that he could kill *for* Will.

“Torture isn’t something I often partake in. So base. I prefer to create art - beauty from the ugliness of the rude. One wouldn’t torture cattle…” Hannibal’s heart swelled in his chest, a wholeness he hadn’t felt in a long time. “But… for you, I am willing to make an exception.”

*

Will brought the few items into his old house. Winston already happily running in the woods.

He wasn’t going to unpack. They would only be there long enough for him to plan out his next move. A fresh start? A change of name. Service the car and drive it until it died. Maybe settle where that happened?

He needed to move on. He needed to forget everything of the past. Of his childhood, New Orleans, Wolf Trap, California. Hannibal. It all needed to go. He couldn’t carry it around any more. He didn’t have the strength to on his own. His bad leg ached just thinking about it.

He made a meagre meal with the canned goods he’d brought and, as the sun went down, he felt an unbearable loneliness at the thought of leaving. Not of leaving Craig and the life he had built with that man, his family, their friends. No, of leaving the idea of Hannibal. That long held belief that if he stayed in one place long enough that Hannibal would find him.

Winston dropped his head onto Will’s knee as he sat at the old wooden dining table.

“Yeah. Just you and me buddy.” He repeated. He had said it so many times this day already. A reminder to himself perhaps?

Winston whined out a yawn and moved over to his bed, circled and then lay down, closing his eyes.

It drew a smile from Will - somehow poignant and illustrative of his loneliness.

Well, if Winston wasn’t going to be any company, Will would find his own. Maybe just this one night - go back to those bars and clubs he had so many times before. Find a faceless

stranger that he could imagine was Hannibal. One last time.

Then he had to move on.

*

The DJ was playing *Tears for Fears - Head over Heels* and a few couples were somewhere between dancing at each other and dancing with each other in slow, comfortable movements. It must be late, Will realised. The DJ only started slowing down the songs when it was leading to the end of the night - a few slow dances to wind down the would-be-lovers on the dancefloor. Will rarely stayed this late in the past, he'd usually given up or left with someone by now, given that was the only reason he ever went to these clubs. But sometimes, like tonight, there was just no one that he wanted to leave with, even if he did fancy a nice fuck. No one he would accept as a halfway decent replacement for the man he really wanted. And that pulled at his heart. The one thing he had wanted to do, to just salve that loneliness for a few hours and he couldn't even do that.

Damn Hannibal! Damn him!

He swigged back the last of his beer and stood up to leave, but then a hand rested on his shoulder and he turned to give the gentle let down to yet another non-candidate.

Instead of a stranger he turned to see a face as familiar as his own. That he saw every day in his Mind Palace. Will's blood ran cold and the hairs on the entirety of his body stood on end. A cold sweat that he usually acquainted with fear, ran over him.

But this wasn't fear.

"I wondered if you'd like to dance? I'm Giovanni… Gio." The man in front of him gave a small smile and Will struggled to hold back a whimper unbecoming of a grown man. His heart was racing and his mind was falling apart. He wanted to pull them together into an embrace but he couldn't allow that yet. It would come. But he couldn't allow himself to fall apart here and now, not when they had only just reunited. Not when it had been so long and they had come so far. And Will had been so close, so terribly close, to giving up.

"John." Will held out his hand and tried to ignore the tremor in it as it was accepted and gently shook - gripped firmly, a thumb grazing over the back of his hand.

Will closed his eyes at the sensation, savoured it and tried to squeeze his eyes shut so tight that there was no chance the tears that wanted to fall would be able to do so. He didn't open his eyes as his hand was turned over and he was slowly lead across the room. An arm slipped around him and he choked back a sob, that caused the arm to tightened. Only then did he open his eyes and look into the maroon set so very close to him. Darker than he remembered, richer - he corrected the image in his mind palace.

There was nothing fancy about the dance - a facsimile of their embrace on the bluff. No ballroom turns, just a gentle sway as they looked at each other, studied each other in silence. Though all the while the smile he received grew. A hand found the side of his face and gently stroked over his beard, over his scar.

He leaned into the hand as it drew him forward until his head was resting on a shoulder. He sighed and breathed in deeply, taking in the scent that was so familiar to him, brought back so many memories - good and bad. Arms encircled him and pulled him closer until they were just embracing as the song played out.

Something happens and I'm head over heels
Ah, don't take my heart, don't break my heart
Don't, don't, don't throw it away

Will listened to the lyrics he knew well already, but he was sure now would never forget.

“If I saw you every day, forever, I would remember this time.” Will muttered against Hannibal’s neck. Arms tightened around him in response.

When the song ended they left, hand in hand, and walked to Will’s car. He was silent, there was nothing he could say, not here. He just wanted them to be alone. Maybe they both felt that way, the drive silent too.

He let them into his house, Winston greeted them both, tail wagging and excited yelps until Will whistled for him to calm. The dog did - sitting at the command - his tail still beating heavy against the floor, tongue lolling as he looked eagerly at them both. It made Will smile, he wanted to laugh but he knew if he did he would cry too and wasn’t sure he’d be able to stop. He opened the door and let the excited dog run into the woods to avoid further pawing.

Will closed the door and leaned into it for a moment, resting his forehead on cool wood and taking in a deep breath - steadying himself. Trying to quash the years of anticipation, of mixed dread and excitement. The years and *years* of it. He turned back to the room and faced maroon eyes and a gentle smile.

“Hello Will.”

“Hello Hannibal.”

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

> “Where were you Hannibal? Where *were* you? I’ve been waiting.” Will’s voice trembled.

“I didn’t think you were coming for me.” Will admitted quietly, looking down. “I was going to leave.”

“We still can. I have a boat. We can leave whenever you’re ready.” Hannibal wanted to reach out the distance between them, renew the embrace from an hour before, but he was terrified it might shatter them both into shards.

“And just like that?” Will huffed a light laugh and shook his head. “You can come in and expect that? Just like that? It’s been nearly 6 years Hannibal.” There was no anger there, exasperation perhaps, exhaustion.

Even so Hannibal bowed his head, his heart racing. So long he had held back because he had presumed Will’s rejection of him. Perhaps the longer he had waited the more guaranteed that rejection had become?

But then a hand was on his arm, tentative. Slowly tracing down to his hand and taking it, pulling him closer. A finger under his chin, lifting it. Stormy blue eyes meeting his.

“Where were you Hannibal? Where *were* you? I’ve been waiting.” Will’s voice trembled.

Will could crush him in this moment, there was no doubt within him. Will’s words and actions held him hostage in that slight moment in time. Will could deny him, turn from him. Devastate him.

It would be a reckoning.

He pushed the thoughts down with little success. Will had enacted his reckoning already, pulling them both over the bluff... and then he had shared his love with other men - another reckoning that Will was surely unaware of. But it had at least an equal and damaging effect on Hannibal’s psyche, dare he say, his heart.

“I waited, and…” Will trailed off.

They were so close now. Only breath between them.

“You started a new life.” Hannibal added. “I had no right to intrude on any happiness you found.”

Will's eyes were a tumult of emotion, his tone wavering between soft and hard - "Hannibal, I never started a new life. I lived in limbo as I explored the man I might be, the man I could be with you. Imagining the life we might have had, imagining how… how we might have made love…"

Hannibal was startled as Will surged forward and pressed their lips together. A slow and easily deepening kiss as Will's arms snaked around him and held him close. Hannibal hesitated for a moment, too shocked to immediately respond. But then his own arms coiled around Will and he opened to him. It was slow and sweet. It was beautiful. It seemed to last forever and yet only a few moments.

Will broke back, breathing hard, shaking. "They were all pale copies. It was you I needed, and now you're here."

Hannibal couldn't stop the whimper that rose from his throat. "You… You're the only person who could ever compromise me. The only lure that would ever have worked."

Hannibal wasn't sure who initiated it then but they were kissing again, desperate and needy. Bodies pressed together and bringing forth from him a low moan as he felt Will's hardness. He hadn't been with anyone physically in so long, he'd had no interest and not felt the loss of it until now. And here was Will, here and now.

He knew they had to talk. There was so much to say, so much to explain and acknowledge. But in that moment there could be no words.

They kissed, their hands roaming, their tongues teasing. They felt already familiar and easy - they were already so intimate it was hard to believe they had never kissed before this night.

Will's hands came up to his shoulders and started to push Hannibal's jacket off. It started a frenzy that ended with Hannibal topless, Will down to his undershirt and hands reaching for trousers, both fumbling and trying desperately to release each other from their confines as needy kisses continued.

He was unsure which of them initiated it, but they were lowering to the floor, Hannibal on his back on the aged wooden boards. Will followed, awkwardly, his injured leg making it difficult for him to lower himself as smoothly as he might have done years before. Before the bluff. But then he was there, kissing Hannibal again, pressing between his legs as their partially undone trousers chaffed between them.

They rutted like teenagers. Moans and grunts between them, drawing sharp breaths between kisses.

"We never went this far, you and I Why did we never get this far?" Will breathed out the words. "I never even thought… I never. But then I realised and I wanted... and I imagined your face everywhere. I imagined fucking you, being fucked by you. Being together… it felt so inevitable. We had blurred together and yet we never went this far…" There was a note of sorrow and desperation in Will's voice.

He moved back, on his knees between Hannibal's legs as he finished undoing his trousers, pulling down his boxers and drawing out his cock. Giving it a slow stroke as he watched Hannibal who had started to follow suit, releasing his own aching length.

"Will…" the name came out a whisper as he reached forward.

Will moved toward him, taking him in hand and pressing them both together. Repositioning Hannibal's hand around them both and then his over the top. Tears brimmed in Will's eyes though there was no sadness there, one escaping to roll down his cheek as his eyes closed to the sensations and their hands began to move together.

They lost themselves to the bliss of each other. To primal sounds and thrusting bodies, until they were both spent and holding each other messily, sated for now.

*

Hannibal woke before Will, the younger man in the crook of his arm. They had fallen into bed naked and bone weary. Stripping their soiled clothes after their initial release, exhaustion taking hold of them in eventual hours later after more explorations with hands and mouths.

He dared not move, dared not breathe - worried that he would wake him and break this spell. And yet he couldn't resist sliding a hand up the naked back, soft skin under his fingertips until he ran them into the hair at Will's nape. He let out a deep breath on a sigh as Will nestled further into him.

Then Will opened his eyes and smiled up at him - "morning." His voice was rough with sleep, a thick twang of accent. Unguarded. Hannibal's chest tightened.
"I never imagined we would have this. Desired it, but never thought it could be a reality." Hannibal muttered with wonder as he continued playing with the hair at the back of Will's neck.

"Post coital?" Will huffed a laugh but didn't move other than to press his head slightly back into Hannibal's gentle fingers. An ease to him that had replaced the desperate need of the previous night. Hannibal found both moods equally appealing.

"Casually intimate." Hannibal corrected with a soft smile. "I wasn't sure it was something ever destined for us."

"Huh." Will seemed to be thinking it over. "I guess back then you might not have considered it."

"You did?" Hannibal was surprised.

"No, I mean… yes. But. Not until just before Dolarhyde. I just… I had never considered us that way, never um… never thought that you were capable of love. And once I realised you were, I guess it changed my outlook on a few things. Not least sexuality. Love. Soul mates, I guess for want of a better and much less sappy phrase." Will chuckled.

Hannibal's chest was tight. He had never truly thought, not even having known and witnessed that Will was now sexually intimate with men, that this might feel the same for him. The years old connection that now felt renewed.

"What made you change your mind?"

"Bedelia actually. I asked her if you were in love with me." Will laughed.

"And she said yes?" Hannibal grinned and shook his head, wondering what his colleague might have been up to.

"Ha! No. She came out with some poetic shit, but she essentially meant yes. And then I knew."

"That you loved me?" Hannibal asked cautiously.

Another laugh. "God no. I didn't know I loved you until I pulled us over the bluff. The moment I realised I could live with it, with you - us. And it was too late. Then I hit the rocks."

"A lot has happened since then." Hannibal sighed. "So much time apart. I wish-"

Will pulled away, moving to prop himself up and half covering Hannibal's chest.

"We're together now Hannibal, that's all that matters. I mean... I'm sure we've both been on personal and physical journeys, learned what we needed to? To make this work?" Will was smiling but looked a little concerned and in need of reassurance, his tone full of a false levity.

Hannibal smiled and nodded. "Of course."

"So… where have you been? Europe? I figured you would have moved on from South America after you were sighted there."

"Actually." He hesitated. They needed to be honest, he knew that, but he had no idea how Will might react to knowing how close they had been for so many years. "Of... of late, I've been in California."

Will grinned. "Because of the Ripper copies? I had hoped they would draw you out… I mean I actually thought you'd be too smart to be reeled in, just hoped that you were stupid enough so that we could find each other."

Hannibal tried to smile but his jaw clenched. "Longer actually. I… Will, I've been watching you for some time… years."

Will looked confused for a moment. "But… I didn't… what do you mean? Since when?"

"Since… Winston was relocated here."

Will pulled out of his arms then and sat back on his haunches - staring at him slack jawed. Hannibal took a deep breath and prepared himself for the worst. Will was still for a moment,

and then Hannibal jumped as Will let out an unexpected bark of laughter.

“Damn, Hannibal. Goddam! I don’t even… all this time and…” his words trailed off into laughter.

“I can do nothing more than apologise Will, as you said, I suppose I was on a journey and-”

Will leaned in and pressed a finger to his mouth. “It's been nearly 6 years, I almost don't care what you did at this point. You’ve done worse, I just need you to not go anywhere again. Why ever you stayed away, you had your reasons. We can talk about it sometime, catch up. But right now,” his hand splayed against Hannibal’s chest. “I just want to kiss you until you forget English… and possibly Lithuanian too.”

Hannibal barely had chance to nod his acquiescence before Will was on him and pressing him back to the bed.

*

Will wanted to laugh at how his own hands trembled as he grabbed the lube and condoms from the car. He had bought them the night before on his way to the club, and now he was definitely thankful for the foresight.

His mind reeled as he returned to the house, put down a bowl of food for Winston and propped the back door open so the mut could come and go whilst Will anticipated being distracted.

But that was as far as his planning went. They had spent some time the night before exploring each other in the dark. But as the day had dawned Will wondered at the whole thing. They didn’t need to go further, not right now. Not if they didn’t feel it - wait, take it slow. He didn’t want anything to be forced. A desperate need clawing inside him even as he decided that.

When he got back to the bedroom Hannibal was sitting up in the bed, staring thoughtfully off into the middle distance. A smile lit up his face as he saw Will. Will shucked off the robe he’d put on and stood naked at the foot of the bed.

“I want you to fuck me.” Will blurted, panting and suddenly hard. “I… I need…”

He was sure he saw Hannibal swallow hard.

“Will… I…”

Will moved forward, dropping the items onto the bed as he crawled over Hannibal and came to a rest on his thighs.

“We’re both so old.” He chuckled, stroking a hand down Hannibal’s face as he took him in. His greying stubble, the shock of white in his grey hair.

Hannibal caught Will’s hand and brought it to his mouth, pressing his lips to the palm. “This still seems so unreal.” He muttered against the flesh.

Will nodded. He couldn't agree more. It felt like it might all vanish in the blink of an eye.

"I need to feel you." He said quietly before leaning in and nipping at Hannibal's lips until he opened to him and Will kissed him deeply.

In truth he was terrified.

This wasn't something he had done often and each time only with Hannibal in mind. Urging his lovers to fuck him hard and rough in the way he was sure Hannibal would. He wanted that now as he ground down over the bed clothes on Hannibal's thickening length.

Hannibal pushed him back gently. "We should talk…"

"We have the rest of our lives to talk." Will countered softly, seeking Hannibal's lips again.

"We have the rest of our lives for this also." Hannibal's tone was a little firmer but still light and Will sat back to look at him.

He saw the fear and longing mixed in his eyes and frowned. "What is it Hannibal?"

Hannibal opened his mouth as though to speak but stopped himself.

"Talk to me. If years with and without you taught me anything, it's that you and I need to work on our communication." Soft words again, delivered with a smile.

That seemed to loosen Hannibal and he returned the smile somewhat warily. "I… I don't want to disappoint you. You've had many lovers, you-"

Will pressed a finger to Hannibal's lips and frowned. "No. Fuck no, Hannibal. I'm not taking this shit. Six years and now you're going to be a shadow of that man you were before? No." He started to grind down again, taking Hannibal's hands and placing them on his hips. "If I had asked you to fuck me before… before you handed yourself in. What then? At your dinner table? As we talked about running together. If I had asked you then?" Will realised his tone was becoming increasingly more angry or frustrated or both. "You would have bent me over that table, dinner forgotten. You would have fucked me so hard I would never have been able to question your feelings for me."

Will clenched his jaw and waited for Hannibal's response.

He was surprised when those hands under his moved - grabbed his upper arms and maneuvered him so quickly that it was a blur. This was the Ripper. Quick and deadly. Will groaned as Hannibal put him on his back and moved over him.

"Yes…" Will hissed the word as his cock throbbed, caught between them.

Will's heart was thundering with anticipation and more than a little fear. Just as nervous as Hannibal about not living up to expectations.

He gasped as sharp teeth grazed over his throat before Hannibal's mouth was on his again and swallowing his moans.

Hannibal slid them together, their tongues, their bodies - so that the mutual hardness caused friction against each other. Will continued to moan and spread his legs as far as he could, the ache running through his bad leg barely registered.

“Please…” He broke off the kiss and gasped out the word.

Hannibal grunted and shifted, moving down Will’s body, trailing lips and tongue over him. He nuzzled at the side of Will’s cock before taking it into his mouth.

The feeling was extraordinary, so long anticipated. Will arched off the bed and gasped. “Oh, oh fuck…” He knew he would cum too soon if Hannibal kept swirling his tongue over him like that. He tried to sit enough to push Hannibal off.

Hannibal moved back onto his knees with a deadly grin that caught Will’s breath. That was him, that was *his* Hannibal.

Will tried to move. Aching at the thought of being fucked, he drew up his knees and rotated his upper body to move onto his front, drawing a sharp shocked breath as pain shot through his leg.

“Will.” Concern was in Hannibal’s tone and touch as he eased Will back onto the bed and hovered over him once more.

“My leg.” Will winced and shook his head, annoyed at the fucking liability of it. “It…” His breath caught again as Hannibal sat back once more and ran a hand over his leg - feeling the scarring of the misshapen limb. “Please. Don’t.” Will grit his teeth against the anguish. He hated his leg being touched, being noticed. It made him weak and he never wanted to be weak with Hannibal.

Hannibal leaned in, his hands still gently moving over Will’s leg, his lips meeting the flesh of his inner thigh. Will let his head fall back and blinked back threatening tears and the tightness in his chest as Hannibal caressed him. He lay gentle kisses over skin and scars, letting one hand move slowly down and lightly move over Will’s hole.

That drew from Will a moan that he couldn’t help.

Sensual.

He hadn’t expected sensual. Love and care and tenderness. He had expected hard and fast and desperate. He had expected Hannibal to handle him roughly. And now he had no idea why. Maybe he had thought that of the beast within Hannibal but the truth dawned on him - it was that same beast that created art and beauty of the ugly dead. That beast was the heart within Hannibal. The heart that beat for Will.

Will let tears fall silently, biting his lower lip as Hannibal parted from him long enough to retrieve the lube and condoms.

Hannibal spent time and care working him open. Pressing kisses to his thighs and the scar across his belly as he eased fingers gently in and out. Will couldn’t speak as his chest heaved

with each motion, tears wetting the pillow beneath him as Hannibal made love to him with his hands.

He thought he would lose his mind by the time Hannibal withdrew his fingers and pushed into him, slow and careful, a hand still stroking his bad leg. The room was full of the sound of their panting breaths and Will's gentle sobs.

Hannibal was smiling, beautiful and deadly, as he moved over Will, seating himself fully within him as he moved in to kiss the tears from Will's cheeks. Will only sobbed all the more as he drew his arms and legs around Hannibal, holding him close as they rocked together.

The angle was just enough to cause little sparks within him, the friction between them enough to pull groans as they moved slowly together. One of Hannibal's hands reached down to his good leg and pulled it up, higher over his hip, to allow a deeper but still gentle thrust.

The movements were teasingly slow, and with each one Will pressed himself tighter to Hannibal until they were so close his face was buried in Hannibal's neck and he could feel the grey chest hair brushing against him.

"I love you… I…" Will sobbed out the words. "I missed you."

Hannibal was kissing him then, pressing his lips to any flesh he could reach as he moved back slightly, enough to thrust more fully. He let go of Will's leg and snaked his hand between them. Will's head dropped back with an anguished sob as Hannibal stroked his cock in time with his thrusts. It was still slow, still achingly slow, but Will felt his orgasm pooling. He wasn't sure he had ever cum from such gentle love making before. Not with anyone.

He gripped Hannibal's shoulders, his fingers biting into the meat there as he cried out. Hannibal worked him through his orgasm, milking everything from him as cum spilled over Hannibal's fist and Will's stomach. Hannibal's own rhythm picked up only slightly as he pressed through Will's tightening muscles, gripping around him.

"Please…" Will begged, his fingers digging in even harder and his thighs squeezing as he urged Hannibal to his own end.

Hannibal closed his eyes, bliss written in every muscle there as his jaw fell slack and his hips stuttered. He thrust erratically a few more times as he spilled inside Will, letting out a long moan before falling forward and into Will's embrace.

*

It felt like they lay there for an eternity. Wrapped in each other as Hannibal held him tight, allowed him to cry and take comfort in the one man he had sought to connect so wholly with.

When they finally pulled apart Hannibal lead him to the bathroom and they showered together. Gentle kisses and roaming fingers until they were interrupted by scratching and whining as Winston clearly decided he was fed up of being ignored.

Hannibal and Will both laughed, low and fondly.

Will grabbed a towel and went back to the bedroom, Winston following eagerly and settling on the bed once he got in there, watched the door expectantly and wagging his tail when Hannibal joined them, towel around waist but still dripping - a sight to behold.

“I think Winston approves.” Will chuckled.

“Oh yes, Winston and I are old friends.” Hannibal said and then looked a little hesitant before adding. “I… may have spent time with him on occasion over the years.”

“Fucking hell.” Will laughed and shook his head. “So completely ridiculous. You couldn’t write this shit. *Love sick serial killer stalks would-be boyfriend, befriends dog.* Freddie Lounds would have a field day!”

Hannibal let out a sigh and clearly tried to look more put out than he actually was.

“I guess we *should* talk.” Will finally allowed. “I have a feeling there are many things you need to tell me about the last few years.”

Will watched Hannibal’s jaw clench and the tight nod almost made him want to say - forget it. It didn’t matter anymore did it?

“We’ll get to it.” Will dismissed. “It isn’t important right now.”

Hannibal smiled and moved to rest his hand on top of Will’s. “I’ll tell you everything, in time.”
Will nodded and looked at Hannibal with something like wonder. At them finally being together, at the man himself. “Who are you really?” Will asked. “Do I really know you?”

“You know who I am Will, better than anyone.”

“Yes…I think I do… did. I knew your beast, I reflect it - a truth I should have admitted sooner... But that isn’t the whole you. I don’t know that I’ve spent a lot of time with the real *you.*”

“In what respect?” Hannibal frowned, but the slight smile didn’t wane.

“The interests and hobbies you had in Baltimore – how many of them were real, how many for show?” Will asked a question he had wondered so often over the years.

“All were real, I enjoy cooking, entertaining, music, opera… but perhaps they were also for show. The extreme to which I took them. They were a façade yes, but a lie based in truth is always the best kind to keep.” Hannibal replied so openly and without question that it took Will slightly aback.

“Yeah I just…” He shook his head and smiled. “I wonder if somewhere inside there’s a you that likes to hang out in sweats at the weekend and drink beer.” Will teased. “Not that you have to I mean… I just… before the Dragon you seemed… right before I mean, you seemed more casual. More at ease. I liked that you… a lot. The you who had nothing to lose when you asked if I was going your way.” That moment etched in his brain - written into the eternity of his memory palace.

Hannibal grinned at that. “Yes, I… I meant what I said, about relaxing with oneself. That always stuck with me, having said that to you and known that the advice came from it having applied to me. When I had been arrested there was no more pretence, I could drop the person suit. I did. That was the real me, on the bluff-“

“I liked that you. That’s the you I’ve been searching for. Not stuffy suits and opera tickets, that sort of life was clearly meant for you.” Will hesitated for a moment. “But, I don’t need any of that shit. I don’t want it. Hell we could go live in a cabin in the middle of nowhere and I would be happy as long as we are together.”

Hannibal frowned. “Stuffy suits and opera tickets… is what you think of me?” He paused, took a breath. “The life meant for me was stolen along with my family and childhood. I can live without the finer things. I don't need tailored clothes, nights at the opera, prestige, wealth, renown. But all of that I had, I earned. I earned every bit of it, I earned back everything that was stolen from me as a child because it was mine and no one had a right to take it.” He paused and took a calming breath, turning to Will fully and looking deep into his eyes. “But there is nothing I wouldn't give up, even my freedom, for you Will. You are worth everything.”

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Escalations and happy endings

Will had always planned on leaving Craig. He had continued to be convenient if nothing more, and it had been simple in it's own way. And yes, there had been something about the way Craig treated him that held him there. He wasn't a glutton for punishment but deep down, he realised, he didn't want to be happy. He didn't want someone he could find that with other than Hannibal, and he didn't want another nice guy - another Brad - to get hurt on his journey of self discovery. In truth he thought he would be with Craig until Hannibal found him, and in a roundabout way, that was the case.

"Hannibal… what did you do?"

Hannibal was holding out his hand to help Will onto the boat but Will didn't take it, climbing expertly aboard and raising an eyebrow at his lover.

A day they had holed up in Will's little house. A day of love and exploration and truths, before Hannibal had mentioned he had better get back to Craig before the man died of thirst and starvation. Made a joke about having at least cracked the window in case it got hot.

Will had been completely dumbfounded as he tried to fathom the initial words and then the further explanation he received on their drive to the dock.

The boat was actually really nice. A good size, great condition. But he couldn't allow himself to think about that right now.

His lover apparently had his boyfriend tied up in the belly of the boat.

Hannibal quirked a cheeky eyebrow, seeming to grow ever more himself the more time they spent together.

I've never known myself as well as I know myself when I'm with him.

Will opened the door and let himself down the stairs as Hannibal started on the moorings.

He shook his head and rolled his eyes at the sight before him as the boat slowly moved out of the dock with Hannibal at the helm.

"Jomm!" a muffled noise that Will knew was supposed to be his name, muffled by the gag.

Craig looked like absolute shit. Sores from pulling at the ropes, his clothes had been neatly shredded by a scalpel, hanging off him in rags. He had clearly soiled himself several times. The man was largely unharmed but clearly terrified and humiliated.

Hannibal had said on the drive over that it was up to Will - they could kill him - but that had to be Will's choice as much as Hannibal wanted to slit the man's throat. Will knew Hannibal wanted them to kill him together and part of Will wanted that too. But… Will thought of Craig's family who had welcomed him with open arms. And the fact was, he wasn't stupid - he knew what Craig was like and what he had gotten into with him. He'd had plenty of opportunities to leave but had stayed and accepted that behaviour - could he be mad at Craig taking advantage of the forgiveness Will gave? Yes. But could he kill him for it?

He moved and crouched in front of Craig who appeared to be reeling between relieved and terrified. Craig tried to speak but Will shook his head.

"I see you met my friend." Will started before letting out a deep sigh. "Truth is Craig, you're a fucking piece of shit, so I hope you'll appreciate how lucky you are that I'm not going to let him kill you."

Craig whimpered and tears rolled down his cheeks, wetting the skin that was already stained red from previous tears. Ah, that look - an inner terror. Will could see it. The same look Dolarhyde had given him once he had seen the truth inside Will - the beast that Hannibal had always been able to see.

"Don't worry." Will said, cold. "I can't do that to your family. So think about that when you get back to them, before you start taking them for granted."

More whining and sobbing, Craig nodded. Will considered removing the uncomfortable gag, but really didn't want to hear anything the man would say if his mouth was freed.

"We're going up the coast, we're going to drop you off. So stop pissing your pants."

Will left it at that and left Craig, returning to deck, where Hannibal looked remarkably well suited at the helm. It quirked a smile at Will's lips.

"Are you sure?" Hannibal asked.

"It wouldn't be like the Dragon. I don't want him to mar what we have." Will said, and Hannibal nodded his understanding as they both looked out on the water.

*

Hannibal was torn.

In truth he wanted to kill again with Will. And he wanted Craig Whitaker dead. But it was Will's choice and he was right, it wouldn't be the same. The two separate desires did not add up together.

As the sun lowered in the sky Will put them into dock near his boatyard. He had some items there to collect, and then they would collect Winston and anything else they needed. Release

Craig and disappear.

It was risky and Hannibal didn't like it, but he would allow it for Will.

"I'll check on Craig and then we'll get on with it." Will said.

Hannibal nodded and watched him move to the cabin door before turning his sights on the dock ahead. Will worked there often, aside from the drydock, it was part of his life in California. An existence that Hannibal had only observed. How strange it had been to revolve in his orbit for so long, stranger now to have moved close once more.

His attention was caught by a muffled grunt and he turned back.

Will was on the deck, knocked down as much by surprise as by force, it would seem - though the way he clutched at his leg let Hannibal know Craig had gone for the weakness he knew of. Craig stood over him. Still bound and gagged, his arms behind his back with the remnants of the chair still caught up in the ropes.

"Not very smart Mr Whitaker." Hannibal growled.

He strode forward purposefully, prey in sights.

"Hannibal, wait-" Will started as he pulled himself up from the deck, unable to put weight on his bad leg. The words startled Craig and he turned, lost his footing.

It seemed to happen in slow motion as Hannibal watched the man's eyes widen in fear as he fell backwards.

Will reached forward but was too slow. The splash rocked the boat so very slightly.

They both looked over the side, watching bubbles but Craig Whitaker, arms and mouth bound, did not resurface. The bubbles trailed into nothing.

"Fuck." Will said, slamming his hands down on the low rail. "I knew his own fucking stupidity would be the death of him."

Hannibal searched Will's face for some sign of amusement but it seemed as though the humour in the comment had been unintentional.

"You cannot hold yourself responsible." Hannibal, slid his hand to Will's waist, acutely aware that his lover wasn't throwing himself into the water in order to bring Craig to the surface in an attempt to revive him. But thinking better than to mention it.

Will sighed and sagged against him as though it were the end of something and the beginning of something else. And he would be right. Whatever Will had had in his life with other men, or even before that - he had Hannibal now. The way Will sank back into him though, it was so surreal. So easily they had fallen into this comfortable closeness after only a few short hours. After so many long years.

*

The plan changed only slightly.

Will looked down at Craig's lifeless body. Dragged out of the water and unbound, Will had pulled him into one of the small rentals kept at the dock He fastened it to their boat whilst Hannibal went to retrieve a few possessions from his place, then collect Will's things and Winston.

Will sent Susan a text saying Craig had come home and they were taking a day trip to work things out, she replied that she was glad they were going to work it out and hoped they had fun. Will shook his head. Fucking Craig, he could never make anything easy.

They would sail out, sink the boat, make it look like an accident. By the time Craig was recovered, if he ever was, there wouldn't be enough flesh to indicate what really happened.

A fresh start after all.

Will waited. Stood and watched and waited.

The only thing that was important now was starting over with Hannibal. But letting him leave on his own after having just been reunited was harder than he would allow himself to show. He waited and watched as the sun disappeared completely.

He didn't move, just waited.

Would he be waiting forever? When he had been so close...

And then the car pulled up and Hannibal stepped out, Winston running at his heels - tail wagging and tongue lolling.

Will breathed a sigh of relief.

Five Months Later

"Will…" There was a hint of warning in Hannibal's tone, darker and more dangerous than the one he used when Will teased him in the bedroom.

Will looked up, panting, shirt soaked in blood and sweat. He knew Hannibal would be angry, he liked to be meticulous and neat. And he wasn't wrong, that was how he had managed to evade authorities for decades.

"We'll have to move again." Will panted, trying to sound contrite.

Another move.

After California they had moved twice more because of Will. He did feel bad, really. They weren't getting any younger and Hannibal clearly wanted to be settled again. He missed having the pretence of a normal life having barely had a shadow of one for the years he watched Will. He wanted what Will had had with Craig, Will knew. But the temptation was sometimes too great...

After Craig, after California they had killed together. A sounder of three assholes Will had chosen, they had hunted and killed together, and Hannibal had served.

Will had revelled in it. But as he created this tableau - his second kill without Hannibal - he knew as well as Hannibal did that there was a problem. A disconnect between them.

“I thought you liked this, wanted this?” Will said, fresh from the shower and lowering himself into their shared bed in the mountain cabin they were renting.

“I want you Will, and the more you do this, the more chance of getting caught” Hannibal let out a sigh and rolled away. A stab of pain in Will’s chest at the action. “If you want to be careful, do things as I say, then we can do that, but this… This isn’t smart.”

“Did you just insult my intelligence, Doctor Lecter?” Will chuckled.

“It isn’t funny either. I mean it Will.” Hannibal huffed and then sighed, adding quietly “You’re escalating, you realise that don’t you?”

Will scoffed. But he did know.

You’re escalating, Will. How many times had he heard Hannibal’s voice in his head tell him that in the last couple of years?

“You will tear us apart.” Hannibal said, little more than a whisper.

Will felt a tight pain in his chest. He snorted indignantly and got out of bed, silently leaving the room.

*

Hannibal watched Will play with Winston in the garden. A coldness between them that they had to fix.

Hannibal understood the power that came with death. There was something heady about feeling so godlike with life in your hands. He had known it before even becoming a surgeon. He had known it when he had first killed as a teenager - a butcher. Butchered. His own divine justice on the man.

But he had never escalated, and that was one of the reasons he had never been caught. Because it wasn’t an addiction to him. He wasn’t chasing an ever greater high as most killers. As Will was.

Days they had gone without really speaking now, though Will only spent the first night on the couch. An unbearable closeness the following nights as they lay next to each other - not touching and with a silent divide between them.

Will came in through the backdoor, noting Hannibal’s presence but still saying nothing. Hannibal balled his fist and slammed it to the countertop.

“Dammit Will. I won’t let you do this.”

“What am I doing?” Will bit back, tone harsh.

“Please.” Hannibal softened his tone and let out a breath. “Let me help you.”

“How?” Will laughed. “I don’t need any help.”

As Will went to leave the room, Hannibal moved forward and snatched hold of his arm. “I see it Will, I understand. Do you think you’re the first killer I have known, that I have helped?”

“Get the fuck off me Hannibal.” He tried to pull away but Hannibal used his bulk to push him to the wall. Perhaps his words had been wrong because the flush in Will’s cheeks and the tone in his voice spoke of jealousy at Hannibal’s words.

“Please… I can’t lose you.” Hannibal kept the sob from arising as it wished, but felt the dampness of eyes and cheeks.

They stood and breathed together, both calming from the sudden outburst.

“Please.” Hannibal pleaded again.

Will leaned into him. Sobs escaping them both.

Nine Months Later

“Yes Will, that’s good. Expertly done.” Hannibal beamed proudly as Will prepared the meat. Ecstatically happy.

And now Will was grinning, dangerously - he wished Bedelia could see the grin she brought to his face.

“Perfect. Another few minutes.” Hannibal said as Will pushed the leg back into the oven. “Go clean up, I will see if Bedelia is ready to join us for dinner.”

It was a risk he knew, but no greater risk than that Will would have put them to had he continued as he was going. Had he not allowed Hannibal to guide him and properly mentor him. To temper him to control that urge until it was no longer an urge. To come through the addiction and know that he had that power of a god. And that, as a god, he must give and take in precise measures so as not to upset the balance.

Will had finally reached his becoming, had finally become that beast-god that was destined to stand at Hannibal’s side. And he only had asked for one thing in return.

It had made Hannibal chuckle before he realised Will was serious. It had been so long, so many years, and yet there was something of Bedelia that Will could not forgive. Hannibal argued him down from death - true she had been a colleague but he felt a sort of pity for her too, that she had never been what he had wanted or needed. He had agreed to a dinner. With Bedelia. Will had brightened at the idea.

He helped the doped woman into a dress and down to the dinner table.

“You must forgive me Bedelia, in truth you perhaps did not need so high a dosage, but I think it would be to your benefit to remain silent at dinner. Will might be tempted to remove your tongue, or worse.” He chuckled. “I don’t know how you got under his skin so completely. Perhaps - on reflection - that was not wise.”

Bedelia slumped against him a little and he righted her in the chair. Will had already placed the perfectly cooked leg on the table, and it smelt very good. Hannibal was sure even Bedelia would enjoy it. Will had done brilliantly.

When they finally sat Will seemed as bright as he had ever seen him. Not killing Bedelia was perhaps therapeutic. His desire to kill her was reined in, he was in control. It was the ultimate test of everything he had learned from Hannibal in the last few months.

Hannibal carved and Will set vegetables on Bedelia’s plate, her eyes roaming between them both with fear and defiance behind the drugged haze.

“You look very well Bedelia. You’ve hardly aged at all.” Hannibal smiled politely.

Will’s lips tweaked into a smile as he tasted the meat before him. “Yes, I was expecting her to taste more gamey.” He agreed and then turned to Bedelia and raised his fork in toast. “My compliments.”

*

Will removed the plates to the kitchen, placing them on the side and smiling to himself. This actually did feel better than killing her. Now she would live with the knowledge that he and Hannibal had found each other, that he would be the final *Bride of Frankenstein* - as she had so eloquently put it some years previous.

To eat her and leave her living felt almost like an insult, and he was sure she would feel the burn of that.

Will’s attention was drawn by a clattering in the dining room.

Hannibal had Bedelia by the wrist, cutlery dropping from her hand.

“Doctor Du Maurier did not enjoy dinner.” Hannibal told Will and raised a brow.

Will itched but did nothing. He wanted to, could even justify it. But he wasn’t going to kill her, Hannibal had said no and he had to be guided by the man if this was ever going to work.

“Maybe it’s time to go.” Will said. It wasn’t a question. Hannibal nodded.

They were several towns over by the time they stopped into a motel and settled for the night.

When Hannibal finished in the bathroom and came to bed, Will moved closer, snuggling into him.

“Thank you.” He really meant it. And not for Bedelia, but for the guidance and tempering. For keeping them together and safe. He knew Hannibal understood that when he pulled Will

to him and kissed his forehead.

“I never want to lose you again. This was dangerous, we leave tomorrow and start over. We never look back.” Hannibal told him.

Will nodded and smiled. “Happily ever after?”

“If you like.” Will could feel the smirk against his skin where Hannibal’s lips rested on his forehead.

He leaned down then, lips seeking Will’s and he willingly gave them up. It was tender, until it wasn’t.

Hannibal pulled Will over him, letting himself be pinned, and Will went without fuss. He could read Hannibal’s desire in his eyes.

Yes, they were often tender. But sometimes they weren’t.

“You were magnificent Will. So precise in your cuts.” Hannibal bit at his shoulders, hard enough to bruise.

He felt Hannibal’s hardness dig into his thigh and between that and the bites, his own cock responded.

“I learned from the best.” Will grinned before sinking his own teeth into the flesh where Hannibal’s neck joined his shoulder. Hannibal let out a hiss and dug his nails into Will’s back until the pain pulled Will away. “What do you want Hannibal? You’re hungry. Tonight made you hungry…”

Hannibal nodded and Will understood it. He knew because he felt the same way whenever he glimpsed the beast inside of Hannibal.

Will pulled off and rose from the bed, rummaging in his bag until he found lube and condoms. When he turned back Hannibal was stroking himself, long leisurely pulls on his hard length - his eyes closed. Will studied him for a moment. So intimately acquainted they had become. Such a beautiful body his lover had - *especially for a man his age*, Will had joked on occasion.

“You taking care of it yourself Hannibal?” Will asked, tone halfway between teasing and warning.

Hannibal opened his eyes and shook his head slowly, lust pouring from him in an animalistic way. It made Will catch his breath. Devastatingly dangerous. Perfect.

He moved back to the bed, laying next to Hannibal, a hand on his hip guiding him to roll away so that Will was behind him. He kissed Hannibal’s back, tracing his lips over the faded Verger brand, before moving up to the meaty flesh of his shoulder and biting once more.

Hannibal grunted and pushed his ass back onto Will’s cock, drawing a low moan from Will.

He surged forward then, one more nip before pulling his teeth away and spreading Hannibal flat to his stomach. Pinned, Hannibal hummed his pleasure at the feeling and Will's cock twitched in response.

He loved pleasing Hannibal, he loved fucking Hannibal and he knew the reverse was also true. They were perfectly attuned to each other's tastes and wants - conjoined.

Will moved back, grabbing Hannibal's hips and pulling his ass up before settling in behind him.

"What do you want Hannibal?" Will repeated.

Hannibal chuckled. "Right now Will, I would like my husband to fuck me so hard that I forget how to speak Lithuanian."

Husband. Will remembered vividly the first time Hannibal had used that term. They had been out for dinner and he had corrected the waiter when he had asked if Hannibal needed a table for himself and his *friend*. Will had joked with Hannibal about what good friends they were, best friends! But in truth when Hannibal had corrected the waiter that Will was his husband, it had made him tremble. It had felt right. They didn't need a ceremony and piece of paper for it to be true. They were too old to be boyfriends, and even lovers felt trite. Partners did not suffice. No, they were husbands.

Will bit his lower lip and grinned, running a hand over Hannibal's rump. "I think I can help with that." He laughed lightly and felt Hannibal startle forward as he lowered his tongue to lick from taint to hole.

Hannibal let out a groan of pleasure and impatience. "Don't tease me Will…"

Will chuckled and licked the same path again before licking and sucking at Hannibal's twitching hole.

"o Dieve…" Hannibal groaned and Will pulled back to laugh.

"Apparently this isn't working. You still clearly know your native tongue."

"I know your tongue well enough." Hannibal countered, humour seeping into the words. "It's your varpa I want."

Will chuckled and shook his head. "All in good time." He lowered his mouth again, circling his tongue, probing at the tight muscle until Hannibal was squirming. By the time he pulled back Hannibal was shaking and panting. This would make it all the more sweeter - undo him so far before fucking him.

Will grabbed the lube and snapped the cap, circling a finger before pushing it in right to the knuckle. Hannibal surged forward and cried out before pushing back. Yes, this is what he wanted tonight, his beautiful husband.

Will worked the finger for only a minute before adding a second, to a grunt from Hannibal. He scissored him open roughly, adding a third finger before the stretch could really

accommodate it. Hannibal wanted to feel the burn of this the next day, he knew. He knew it even before Hannibal groaned for more and pushed back on him once again.

When Hannibal was stretched enough to be deemed even remotely ready, Will donned a condom and slicked his cock, pushing more lube into Hannibal and around his hole before dropping the bottle and lining himself up.

Hannibal pushed back on him as soon as his cockhead was passed the tight rim. Gasping and panting as he impaled himself on Will's cock and Will's fingers bit into the meat of his hips.

"Will…" Hannibal groaned once he they were flesh to flesh. "My beautiful boy. How I adore you."

Will drew back and thrust back in. Again, then again. Each thrust becoming easier and deeper until Hannibal was unable to continue muttering the endearments he had been. Will's knuckles were white as he held Hannibal still, fucking into him with abandon.

"Can you… speak." Will panted the words as each thrust stole his breath.

Hannibal shook his head. His body at once tense and relaxed at the rough pain that he found pleasurable.

"Touch yourself." Will told him. "I… want you to cum on my dick."

Hannibal let out a whimper and repositioned himself in the slightest way so that he could reach a hand to his cock. Will moaned at the thought and started to set a faster pace, thrusting so hard and fast the bed was slamming against the wall. Neither of them much cared, and the fist of Hannibal's free hand balled into the bedspread. He clutched at it as Will pounded into him, each thrust threatening to topple them but for Hannibal's rigid frame holding them up.

Will moaned at the slick sounds of Hannibal tugging his own dick, matching the pace of Will's thrusts. Hannibal was already so tight from the light prep that he just the thought of how his cumming would feel, had Will buzzing.

And then Hannibal cried out and came so suddenly it seemed to catch him off guard. He moaned as Will continued to thrust through the constrictions around him as the muscles gripped him and then pulled the cum from him. He continued to thrust shallowly as his balls drew up and he emptied himself inside Hannibal.

The bed seemed to sway. Maybe it was the euphoria of their orgasms, though it seemed more likely it was the settling of the bed as their momentum no longer drove it forward into the wall.

"That was…" Will tried to speak but his mouth was dry.

Hannibal nodded.

They panted together and Will laced kisses over Hannibal's back as he waited to soften enough to pull out of the extraordinary tightness.

It was bliss. This was bliss.

They were both startled by the loud banging on the motel room wall and froze in place for a moment. “Shut the fuck up in there.” Came the muffled cry of a neighbour. “It’s 2 in the fucking morning.”

Will rested his forehead against Hannibal’s back and they both chuckled.

*

Hannibal did not like the shower, but it was adequate. Good enough to wash away the remnants of their passion so that they could comfortably return to Canada and collect Winston before they left North America altogether.

A long few days of driving ahead, any shower would do.

He walked back into the bedroom and found Will sat on the bed watching the TV.

“Will-”

“Wait.” Will held up his hand and leaned forward to turn up the volume on the set.

... and now a recap of the latest news - Hannibal the Cannibal is believed to be once again at large!

Agent Starling appeared on screen to the flashes of a few cameras in the press pit before her. The segment had cut into the end of her prepared statement and she began taking questions as Hannibal lowered himself to sit next to Will.

“Agent Starling, can you confirm that the FBI consider Doctor Du Maurier to be the latest victim of Hannibal Lecter?”

“We are still investigating all possibilities, but given Doctor Du Maurier’s statement, we can confirm that one line of investigation points toward Doctor Lecter.”

Will grabbed Hannibal’s hand and squeezed it. It had been dangerous. Too dangerous. He was not going to lose Will again.

“Is it true that both Hannibal Lecter and his last victim, Will Graham, may both still be alive and perpetrating crimes together?”

“I am unable to comment further at this time as regards former Special Agent Graham.”

More hands going up and questions shouted as each hound of the press bayed for Starling’s attention.

Hannibal stood and turned off the television before any more questions were asked. None were important.

“Come along Will. Time to leave.”

“Starting over.” Will smiled.

“Oh yes.” Hannibal nodded. “Together.”

He went back to the bathroom to finish getting ready, wiping the steam off the mirror and studying his reflection. Older. Wiser? More mature at least. And yet where Will was concerned he would hold on tight like a toddler to a toy they refused to give up. But Will was no toy.

After everything, no one was ever going to take Will Graham from him again. No matter what.

Epilogue - 1 Year Later

Clarice Starling sipped at her coffee and smiled, watching Molly out in the garden tossing a ball with Walter. He was back from college for the weekend, a nice family day planned for them all.

There was a tight pull in her chest.

She’d promised Molly she would keep them safe, and really, she knew that she should pull out of the *Murder Husbands* case, as it had been ridiculously designated. She had a conflict after all.

A conflict she had been married to for the last four years.

A conflict she really shouldn’t have gotten into when she was still on Will Graham’s witness protection case. But they had been unable to deny the spark between them when she had organised for Winston to be shipped to California. Try as they might, the thing between them wasn’t going to go away. It still hadn’t. It never would. She would do anything for Molly Foster-Starling. She had no doubt the same was true of Hannibal Lecter and Will Graham.

They had both breathed an awful sigh of relief when Will Graham - John Grey - was reported missing. She wasn’t a fool, she had no evidence but she was certain of Graham’s hand in the Ripper Lure murders in California. She had been investigating it when he went missing, and then she had been relieved to drop it. They might have lived in happy ignorance if he and Hannibal hadn’t turned up and maimed Doctor Du Maurier.

It hung over them like the sword of Damocles.

The truth was, with her experience and knowledge of the case; with guidance she’d had from Crawford who was now next to useless in any further investigations - she was the best chance at catching them. No one else on the case was going to come close without her input. It wasn’t conceited, it was a fact and they all knew it.

And once she caught them and put them behind bars, she knew Molly and Walter would be safe.

The phone rang and Molly looked up into the window.

“I got it.” Clarice called out to her, picking up the receiver from the hook on the wall. “Hello?”

“Agent Starling.” The voice was cool and calm, and she recognised it immediately from his BSHCI interview tapes that she had poured over for hours on end.

“Doctor Lecter.” She greeted with a tremor in her voice.

“Don't bother with a trace. I won't be on long enough.” He advised, blasé.

“Where are you, Dr Lecter?”

“We have no plans to call on you, Clarice. Nor your loving family. My dear Will believes the world's more interesting with you in it.” She could hear the smile in his words

“You created a monster there Doctor, be sure he doesn’t turn on you.” She grit her teeth but couldn’t regret the venomous tone.

A slight chuckle on the end of the line that was both warming and chilling. “Created? No, I merely drew him out and guided him. I can feed the caterpillar, I can whisper through the chrysalis, but what hatches follows its own nature and is beyond me.”

“Where are you, Dr Lecter?” She repeated coolly, trying to draw information despite knowing an answer was unlikely.

“We won’t be calling on you or dear Molly and Walter.” His tone was light but there was a warning in the words. “So you take care now to extend us the same courtesy.”

“You know I can't make that promise-” She started.

“I do wish we could chat longer but… Will is preparing dinner and it would be rude to be late. Goodbye Agent Starling.”

“Doctor Lecter? Doctor Lecter?” The line was dead.

Starling looked out at her family as the ball bounced between them. She dialled.

“Hi… yeah, can you put me through to the assistant director? Thanks Tom.” She waited. Molly missed the ball and laughed. “Sir, it’s Agent Starling here. I… I need you to remove me from the Lecter-Graham case.” Walter was laughing at Molly then. “Yes sir, I know. Yes sir. Given my wife’s previous relationship to Will Graham it wouldn’t… yes, sir I realise that.” Molly gave her son a mock scowl and picked the ball back up. “Yes. Thank you sir. I will prepare for a case handover first thing Monday.”

She hung up the phone and went out into the garden.

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